

THIS FIERCE GEOMETRY:  
USES OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN BIBLE  
IN THE ANTI-ABOLITIONIST AND ANTI-GAY RHETORIC  
OF THE UNITED STATES

by

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This dissertation examines the citational use of the Judeo-Christian Bible in two sociopolitical debates within the United States: first, the debate over the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, and second, the contemporary debate over gay rights. This study incorporates two core theses. First, I argue that the contemporary religious right, in its anti-gay use of the Bible, is replicating the hermeneutical practices used by opponents of the abolitionist movement. My second thesis parallels the first: I argue that the contemporary activists who reclaim the Bible as a pro-gay instrument are standing in the same hermeneutical tradition as nineteenth-century Christian abolitionists. This study is thus about the acts of interpreting texts and putting those interpretations to use in the public sphere.

The first chapter lays out the historical and conceptual groundwork for this study. Among the issues considered are the evolution of the biblical canon, the role of interpretive communities in biblical interpretation, and the matrix of human difference, privilege, and marginalization. The second chapter reviews more than thirty biblical passages used by anti-abolitionist activists in their public discourses. There is a comparative thrust to this chapter,

because it juxtaposes this “slavemaster’s Bible” with the biblical passages used in anti-gay discourse. The third chapter is a comparative analysis of the biblical hermeneutics practiced by nineteenth-century abolitionists and contemporary pro-gay thinkers. In this chapter I identify seven general strategies which these two groups hold in common as each engages the biblical text. The fourth and final chapter considers the possible connections that link the hermeneutics of the American abolitionist and gay rights movements to three other currents of thought: first, the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu; second, the minjung theology of South Korea; and third, the philosophy of hermeneutics developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The study ends with a brief coda, which considers some of the political and cultural events of 2009 in light of the dissertation’s main ideas.

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#### *A NOTE ON THE TEXT*

Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible verses quoted in this document are in the King James Version translation as presented in *The African-American Devotional Bible*. Verses marked with NIV are taken from the New International Version translation as presented in *The NIV Study Bible*, and verses marked with NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version translation as presented in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*.

This document makes occasional reference to three works recognized as sacred writings within the Latter-day Saint faith community: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Pearl of Great Price. I have represented these titles according to the recognized convention that sacred writings are neither italicized nor placed in quotation marks when mentioned in the body of a work. I do, however, italicize the specific editions of these books which appear in this document's Works Cited section. Parenthetical references to Doctrine and Covenants as scripture are given in chapter and verse format, as with biblical references.

In citing specific passages from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I have followed the notation convention used by Joseph Dunne in his study *Back to the Rough Ground*.

Furthermore, I have supplemented these citations with page references to the primary English translation I consulted.

Some of the nineteenth century sources cited herein make use of spelling, punctuation and capitalization in ways that are not in accordance with current standard English usage; so as not to excessively distract from these historic texts, I have opted not to append the Latin marker *sic* in brackets after each such incident. I have opted to further eschew the use of *sic* when citing non-U.S. Anglophone writers who employ British spelling conventions in such words as *colour*.

The title of this dissertation is inspired by a line from an English translation of Jorge Luis Borges' sonnet "Emanuel Swedenborg." An excerpt from this particular translation may be found on page xi of this document; the Spanish original may be found in a number of volumes, among them Borges' own *Obra poética*, 2 (140). More on Swedenborg and on his relevance to my arguments may be found in the first chapter of the dissertation.



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I would like to express my gratitude to the following institutions and individuals, each of which has, in some way, contributed to my progress on this dissertation: Barco Law Library, University of Pittsburgh; Clifford E. Barbour Library, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Cross-Cultural and Leadership Development, University of Pittsburgh; Associate Professor Alexis De Veaux of the State University of New York at Buffalo; the Rev. Roberta Dunn, Pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of Pittsburgh; East Suburban Unitarian Universalist Church, Murrysville, Pennsylvania; the Rev. Elder Darlene Garner, Vice-Moderator of Metropolitan Community Churches; Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh; Humanities and Social Sciences Library, New York Public Library, New York City; Levittown Public Library, Levittown, New York; the late Rev. Michael Lumberger of Covenant Church of Pittsburgh; Professor Dwight McBride of the University of Illinois at Chicago; Mid-Manhattan Library, New York Public Library, New York City; The National Association of African American Studies; Chancellor Mark Nordenberg of the University of Pittsburgh; Professor Emeritus Donald Petesch of the University of Pittsburgh; the Pittsburgh First Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Pittsburgh New Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Rainbow

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He would see  
That which earthly eyes do not see:  
The fierce geometry, the crystal  
Labyrinth of God and the sordid  
Milling of infernal delights.

--Jorge Luis Borges,  
“Emanuel Swedenborg” (lines 4-8)

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION: SODOMY, SATAN, AND THE SUMMER OF 2008**

In the summer of 2008, the people of the United States were intensely focused on the evolving presidential campaign. Democrat senators Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois—respectively, the first truly viable female and African-American candidates for the highest elected office in the land—spent the beginning of the summer locked in an historic contest for their party’s nomination. Obama’s eventual victory over Clinton marked the start of his political combat against the presumptive Republican nominee, Senator John McCain of Arizona. Political pundits in all forms of media endlessly dissected and debated the ongoing skirmishes in the Obama-Clinton and Obama-McCain contests.

Alongside the high-profile presidential campaign, however, one local race in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma managed to snare some national media attention. Incumbent County Commissioner Brent Rinehart faced a tough fight in the Republican primary against opponents Brian Maughan and J.D. Johnston. Rinehart brought an unusual weapon to the resulting political combat: a comic book, written by Rinehart himself and illustrated by his friend Shane Suiters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the Suiters/Rinehart comic, this text refers solely to the version published online as a PDF file by *The Oklahoman*. Although *Oklahoman* staff writer John Estus identifies Rinehart as the writer of the comic (“Brent Rinehart’s comic book”), Rinehart is not explicitly credited as writer in the body of the comic itself; thus the bibliography to this work cites illustrator Suiters, who is credited in the text of the comic, as principal author.

The Rinehart/Suiters comic is as much a religious text as it is a political one. The religious theme is introduced on the very first page, which depicts a bespectacled man, clenched fist raised in protest, standing before a courthouse and declaring, “We need someone with guts and a track record of standing up to the liberal good ol’ boys at the courthouse. Lets [sic] take a look at what Brent Rinehart has done as County Commissioner.” Flanking this model citizen on his right is a horned, pitchfork-wielding Satan; on the citizen’s left is a winged, halo-wearing angel. Satan expresses his displeasure with the citizen’s intent, moaning, “The truth—that’s the last thing the people need.” But the angel counters, “I’m here to make sure the truth is told!” Thus Rinehart positions his own political battle as part of a cosmic contest between truth and deception, between God and Satan. The commissioner specifies his theological parameters on the next page, where the bespectacled citizen declares, “I’m voting for Brent Rinehart. He’s a conservative Republican and an active Christian.”

Much of the comic deals with the sort of issues one might expect to be of interest to a county commissioner and his constituents—veterans’ concerns, management of the county jail, property tax, and so forth. In addition to discussing such “bread and butter” issues, however, the comic’s characters also pay particular attention to the subject of homosexuality. For example, the text touts Rinehart’s attempts, while in elected office, to thwart the advance of gay civil rights: the bespectacled citizen boasts, “Brent fought to remove homosexual preferences from the county handbook,” and also notes that while serving on the Oklahoma City Council, Rinehart “voted to remove homosexual banners from city property.” The comic also attacks one of Rinehart’s political foes, Oklahoma State Attorney General Drew Edmondson, who is identified as a “homosexual advocate.”

The comic depicts Rinehart's fight against homosexuality as part of a much larger conflict. The text references, for example, a controversy over proposed changes regarding language on sexual orientation in the Oklahoma's state Code of Judicial Conduct. Bill Graves, an Oklahoma district judge, had attacked the proposed changes as part of a "liberal, pro-homosexual" agenda in an April 8 letter to Oklahoma Bar Association members (Marks, "'Sexual orientation' clause"). Rinehart's bespectacled citizen declares of the controversy, "It is said in the news that Judge Bill Graves wrote that sexual orientation [protections] would protect pedaphiles [sic], polygamists, and homosexuals who practice anal sodomy, defined in state law as 'the detestable and abominable crime against nature.'" On the next page, the character returns to the tactic of linking pedophilia with homosexuality, claiming that "[Oklahoma Attorney General] Drew Edmondson put Oklahoma on record to force the Boy Scouts to accept homosexuals as scout leaders, a pedifile's [sic] dream come true." To emphasize this claim, Suiters and Rinehart include an accompanying woodland scene of a boy scout, crying out for help while being grabbed by a man wearing a toga and headband—the bizarre attire appears to be the illustrator's attempt to depict some sort of stereotypical gay attire. Another section of the comic depicts additional strangely dressed individuals carrying signs which declare "I want to be a Boy Scout leader," "We're here, we're queer, get used to it," "Gay marriage now!" and other slogans. With such text and illustrations Rinehart and Suiters push forward the idea that aggressively activist gays constitute a serious threat to Oklahomans, and to the state's children in particular.

Rinehart's comic elicited outrage and derision from a number of prominent Oklahomans. Through a spokesman, Drew Edmonds, who was personally attacked in the comic, compared Rinehart to a "drowning man" thrashing about in desperation, and added that "nothing Rinehart

says is worthy of comment or approval.” Oklahoma County Sheriff John Whetsel, another of the comic’s targets, condemned it as “extremely pathetic and very bigoted.” Yet another public official disparaged in the comic, Oklahoma Corporation Commissioner Jim Roth, criticized it as “a subterfuge to distract from [Rinehart’s] bad job performance.” The extreme content of the comic even moved Oklahoma County Assessor Leonard Sullivan—one of Rinehart’s fellow Republicans—to declare, “I’ve really encouraged him on more than one occasion to get professional help. He really needs it.”<sup>2</sup>

Rinehart was unapologetic in the face of such criticism of the comic: “The history of my office is that I do expose the homosexual agenda, and that it does exist in the state of Oklahoma, and my history also would show that I am very much opposed to the homosexual agenda” (qtd. in Estus, “Brent Rinehart’s comic”). He took this line of defense onto the national stage when, on July 21, he chose to appear as a guest on CNN’s *American Morning* television program. Interviewer John Roberts noted that critics had assailed the comic as being “blatantly homophobic” and for taking “mudslinging to a brand new low”; Roberts even chided Rinehart for the text’s two different misspellings of the word *pedophile*. The embattled commissioner responded, “Well, one person’s mudslinging, I guess, is another man’s issues. Here in the state of Oklahoma, especially here in Oklahoma County, I believe that homosexual agenda is an issue in this campaign.” He also claimed that “we are in a cultural war, not just here in the state of Oklahoma but nationwide.” The national exposure afforded Rinehart by his CNN interview did not provide any political salvation. Later that month he received only 21 percent of the vote in

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<sup>2</sup> The quotes from Edmondson, Whetsel, Roth, and Sullivan are all taken from John Estus’ reportage (“Brent Rinehart’s comic book”).

the Republican primary; this poor showing cost him his chance to be the party's nominee in the general election (Estus, "Rinehart ousted").

It may be tempting to write off Brent Rinehart as a homophobic extremist, particularly in light of his overwhelming rejection by voters. But the rhetoric of his comic bears further scrutiny. Consider the observations of Keith Gaddie, a political science professor at the University of Oklahoma. Although he refers to the comic as "one of the strangest things I've ever seen," Gaddie nonetheless acknowledges, "In a way, it's a sophisticated piece" (qtd. in Estus, "Brent Rinehart's comic").

In fact, Rinehart and illustrator Suiters do a creditable job of tapping into a particular discourse that has profoundly impacted the culture and politics of the United States for decades: namely, the anti-gay ideology of religious conservatives. To the most fervent proponents of this ideology, the fight against gay rights in general, and against gay marriage in particular, is an epic war in which both Satan and the Judeo-Christian God have staked out positions. Rinehart and Suiters acknowledge this belief in a supernatural component to the gay rights controversy. For example, in the comic Satan is shown pointing his pitchfork at a small child and declaring his wish: "If I can get the kids to believe homosexuality is normal! [sic]" The female angel counters, "Hey Satan, not with Brent around you won't!"

The text and illustrations in the Rinehart/Suiters comic, together with Rinehart's own public statements in defense of the project, form nodes in an interconnected web of religiously justified anti-gay discourse. This discursive web—sometimes blatantly visible, sometimes present as subtly coded allusions—makes its presence felt in public and private institutions throughout the United States. From the Republican Party's 2008 national platform to a sermon preached in an urban church, from the text of a Supreme Court decision to a bumper sticker, this



discourse ultimately has real impact on the lives of lesbian and gay citizens, as well as on their families and friends.

Rinehart is not the first individual to use the comic book as a mode for transmitting this type of anti-gay religious discourse. In fact, the text and illustrations in his campaign comic bear a striking resemblance to those in a number of small tract-sized comics by evangelical Christian writer Jack T. Chick and published by his own Chick Publications. Chick is something of a cultural phenomenon in his own right; as Robert Ito writes, “With more than 500 million copies of his 142 comics in print, including translations in more than 100 languages, Chick is the world's most published living author.” Chick Publications distributes these mini-comics through its website; the digital versions of the comics are also made freely available on that same site. Homosexuality is the primary topic of three Chick comic tracts: *The Gay Blade*, *Sin City*, and *Birds and the Bees*. These three tracts bear copyright dates, respectively, of 1984, 2001, and 2004.<sup>3</sup>

Rinehart's comic echoes particularly the themes and visual iconography of Chick's *Birds and the Bees*. Rinehart's Satan declares his intent to “get the kids to believe homosexuality is normal”; in *Birds*, an elementary school teacher is shown to be in pursuit of the same goal. The teacher invites a gay male couple to address her class, and tells her students that the pair constitutes “an ordinary, loving family.” When one child in the class reveals his father's opposition to homosexuality, the teacher and her guests become hostile. Gesturing wildly, sweat droplets flying from her head, the teacher threatens to send the boy to the principal's office; one of the gay speakers declares that the boy's father “should be in an insane asylum.” The other gay

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<sup>3</sup> Each of these tracts is credited to “J.T.C.” (i.e. Jack T. Chick); it is under J.T.C. that these comic books are listed in this document's Works Cited section.

speaker also says of the opponents of homosexuality, “[i]f we get *our* way, they’ll *all* be in prison.” Chick’s militant pro-gay propagandists thus show no hesitation to bully children.

As does Rinehart, Chick also depicts Satan as the driving force behind the “gay agenda.” The comic depicts each of the gay classroom visitors as being accompanied by a horned demon—apparently invisible to most of the comic’s other characters—whose actions generally mirror those of its human “host.” Chick expands upon the theme that Satan is behind the gay movement as the students converse amongst themselves after class. One student, a girl named Susy, serves as the mouthpiece for anti-gay religious conservatism. After telling her classmates that “God *hates* homosexuality,” she recounts one of the biblical narratives most frequently cited in anti-gay religious discourse: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Susy informs her audience that Sodom was “under the control of Satan and his devils.” Her narration of the Sodom story is accompanied by illustrations depicting the ancient men of Sodom, much like the students’ gay classroom visitors, as infested with demons. Little Susy functions much as the female angel in the Rinehart comic; she is valorized as a truth-teller who stands in opposition to the lies of Satan and his minions. She also shares the female angel’s attitude of righteous optimism, declaring that Jesus is “coming from heaven to smash the devil.”

Chick also depicts a demonic movement to corrupt children in *Sin City*. In this comic, a religious protester is badly injured while picketing a gay pride parade, and subsequently hospitalized. While in the hospital the injured man is visited and propagandized by an openly gay minister who, like the classroom visitors in *Birds*, is accompanied by a demonic familiar. A character named Bob—who fulfils the “Susy” role in this piece—arrives in the hospital room to counter the gay minister’s arguments. Bob exorcizes the gay minister’s demon; as it departs, the horned entity muses of its human host, “As a team we sure ruined a lot of kids!” As in *Birds*, the

Sodom story is recounted. Eventually moved to repentance, the gay minister declares, “Oh God, I’m in trouble. . . . How many young people have I enticed into the gay lifestyle?” –thereby reinforcing the theme of homosexual activists preying on youth.

One topic which particularly unites Rinehart and Chick in indignation is the specter of gay marriage. In *Birds*, one of the two gay classroom visitors introduces the other man to the children as his “wife,” and declares that the two of them are preparing to adopt a baby. Chick, leaving no doubt as to his theological assessment of the men’s partnership, inserts the following caption underneath an illustration of the embracing couple: “God expects a *man* to marry a *woman* and have children. Any other way is forbidden by God.” This pronouncement is underscored with references to three biblical passages: Genesis 2:24, Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:26-27. *The Gay Blade* includes panels depicting the wedding of two men; these scenes precede a vigorous condemnation of “Satan’s shadowy world of homosexuality.” Rinehart’s comic also takes on the gay marriage controversy when it directly asks the reader, “Do you support traditional family values—marriage of one man to one woman?” One of the Rinehart comic’s female characters underscores this particular theme by declaring of herself and her fellow Oklahomans, “We voted overwhelmingly in 2004 that marriage is between one man and one woman.”

The 2004 vote to which this character refers was for a ballot initiative labeled Oklahoma Question 711. The initiative, which, as Rinehart’s comic correctly notes, was approved by a majority of Oklahoma voters, contains the following language: “Amend the state constitution to define marriage as being between one man and one woman; only married people are eligible for the benefits for married people; same-sex marriages from other states are not valid in Oklahoma;

it would be a misdemeanor to issue a marriage license in Oklahoma.”<sup>4</sup> Rinehart’s reference to Question 711 marks a subtle difference between his comic and the three Chick comics. Although Chick condemns both gay marriage in particular and gay rights in general, the overall thrust of the three tracts is more pietistic than political. The three tracts do not single out any specific ballot initiatives, candidates, or political organizations for support, although they do encourage individual readers to couple a conversion to belief in Jesus with rejection of homosexuality on an immediate personal level. To put it another way—Rinehart is focused on election day, whereas Chick is focused on the “Day of Judgment.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this subtle difference in emphasis, however, the text and illustrations of the Rinehart and Chick comics still affirm the authors to be in essential alignment both theologically and politically—in particular, on the issue of gay marriage.

Rinehart’s concern about gay marriage was shared in the summer of 2008 by many religious conservatives in the state of California. In May the state’s Supreme Court had ruled that the state’s constitution guaranteed same-sex couples the same right to marry as it does to opposite-sex couples. The ruling overturned Proposition 22, also known as the “California Defense of Marriage Act,” a 2000 ballot initiative which had banned same-sex marriage in the state. The court’s decision officially took effect on June 16. On that day couples all over the state flocked to government offices in order to obtain marriage licenses and solemnize their vows. Both the time leading up to the court ruling and the day the ruling became effective were

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<sup>4</sup> The results of the ballot initiative vote (“Ballot Measures”), as well as the text of the initiative (“Oklahoma Question”) have been made available online.

<sup>5</sup> Although the phrase “Day of Judgment” is a direct quote from *The Gay Blade*, the concept of divine judgment and its consequences is addressed in all three tracts.

marked by public protests by individuals who echoed the rhetoric of Chick and Rinehart. Justin Ewers reported that in March a protest sign declaring “Sodomy is sin” was wielded outside the courtroom where the California Supreme Court was hearing oral arguments on the gay marriage issue. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that in June the first same-sex couple to receive their marriage license at the courthouse in Beverly Hills were greeted not just by supporters, but also by “protesters quietly holding banners offering varying slogans, including ‘Homo Sex Is Sin!,’ but all suggesting that gay marriage invokes God's wrath” (Carla Hall et. al.). Code words such as “sodomy” and “sin,” when used in the context of anti-gay protests, carry with them the accumulated weight of decades worth of religious anti-gay discourse.

The fight over gay marriage in California did not end with the first state-recognized same-sex marriages in June. Opponents of gay marriage pinned their hopes on Proposition 8, an initiative slated to appear on the ballot in the November general election. If passed, Proposition 8 would eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry in the state of California, essentially nullifying the state Supreme Court’s decision. The campaign over Proposition 8 was far from a California-only affair; activists and analysts alike recognized that this cultural and political battle, occurring in the nation’s most populous state, had clear national implications. Georgetown University law professor Nan Hunter observed, “Culturally and politically, the impact is enormous [. . .]. California has a tradition of being the trend setter in the United States. Of any single development on this issue, legalizing it in California is the biggest single development short of a federal ruling that would render [same-sex marriage] legal nationwide” (quot. in Chibbaro, “Calif. Fight”). The money trail marking the campaign reflected the nationwide interest in Proposition 8. Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in July, John Wildermuth noted that out-of-state money, for both the pro- and anti-Proposition 8 campaigns,

was flooding into California “in supersized chunks.” By late September the two opposing campaigns had raised a combined total of thirty million dollars (Morain and Garrison). Proposition 8 ultimately passed with 52.3% of the vote. Although they had lost this particular battle, many supporters of gay marriage vowed to fight on for their cause.<sup>6</sup>

Supporters of Proposition 8 had tapped into the same cultural reservoir of anti-gay religious discourse as had Brent Rinehart and Jack Chick. Particularly worthy of note was the campaign waged by the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy of California. Between May 15 and June 16, the archbishops of San Francisco and Los Angeles, along with the bishops of Fresno, Monterey, and a number of other dioceses, issued a series of official statements which reaffirm the Catholic Church’s opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the civil sphere. Although the specific wording varied from statement to statement, as a body these documents expressed clear disagreement with the California Supreme Court decision and support for the passage of Proposition 8. On August 1 the bishops and archbishops of California issued a collective statement which reaffirmed all of the earlier statements.<sup>7</sup> This latter document made

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<sup>6</sup> *The Advocate*, a national periodical with a focus on issues facing lesbians and gay men, offered extensive analysis and coverage in the wake of the Proposition 8 results; see Barrett, “The Age of Ignorance”; Ehrenreich, “Anatomy of a Failed Campaign”; Gross, “Pride and Prejudice,”; and McCullom, “Blackout on Proposition 8.”

<sup>7</sup> Individuals and collective bodies issuing the May and June statements included the bishops of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (i.e. the Archbishop and six Auxiliary Bishops speaking as a single body); Richard J. Garcia, Bishop of Monterey; the Office of Media Relations of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles; John T. Steinbock, Bishop of Fresno; Allen Vigneron, Bishop of Oakland; Daniel F. Walsh, Bishop of Santa Rosa; and William K. Weigand, Bishop of Sacramento, speaking as one with his Coadjutor Bishop, Jaime Soto. These statements were all made available via “What Is Marriage?,” an Internet resource page of the

the bishops' political aims, as well as their expectations of Catholic Californians, particularly explicit:

[A]s citizens of California, we need to avail ourselves of the opportunity to overturn this ruling by the California Supreme Court. On the November general election ballot, there will be *Proposition 8* which reads: "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California" [. . .]. [W]e strongly encourage Catholics to provide both the financial support and the volunteer efforts needed for the passage of Proposition 8. And—please exercise your citizenship and vote in November.

The August 1 document, echoing its predecessors, thus functioned as a full-throated declaration of political war.

Woven into this entire body of official ecclesiastic documents were a series of allusions and specific references to the Judeo-Christian Bible. John Steinbock, the Bishop of Fresno, declared in his May 15 statement, "The Catholic Church teaches, based on Christian Scripture and the Judeo-Christian tradition, that marriage is a faithful, exclusive and lifelong union between one man and one woman." Richard J. Garcia, the Bishop of Monterey, reiterated Steinbock's position in his own May 16 statement. Stating that "Church teaching on marriage

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California Catholic Conference. The August 1 collective statement was made available elsewhere, in both HTML and PDF formats, on the California Catholic Conference website. This latter statement, as indicated by the text header on the PDF version, represented the official position of the Archdioceses of Los Angeles and San Francisco, the Dioceses of Fresno, Monterey, Oakland, Orange, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Jose, Santa Rosa and Stockton; the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Van Nuys; and the Maronite Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles.

derives from the words of Jesus,” Garcia directed his flock towards a specific biblical passage: “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?” (Matthew 19:4-5). The New Testament passage thus quoted by Garcia itself incorporates citations of two Old Testament passages—namely, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.<sup>8</sup> In their pastoral message to the Diocese of Sacramento, Bishop William K. Weigand and Coadjutor Bishop Jaime Soto allude to Genesis 1:27 and to the Catholic hierarchy’s politicized interpretation of such biblical passages: “For Catholics, marriage is a reality authored by God in his very act of creating the human race.” Weigand and Soto connect this theological position to practical politics, encouraging the members of their congregations to “work to bring the civil order into harmony with God’s design for marriage.”

Weigand, Soto, and their fellow Roman Catholic bishops of California chart out a theological and political vision of homosexuality that largely parallels those of Brent Rinehart and Jack Chick. Each party deems the practice of homosexuality to be an affront to the Christian god, and each party also decries the movement to advance gay and lesbian rights in the public sphere. And in each case, the cultural touchstone behind each vision is the Judeo-Christian Bible. Sometimes it is directly quoted; sometimes it is alluded to. In either case, this rhetoric acknowledges the profound weight which the Bible carries in the culture of the United States. It is a weight which impels some Americans to try, as in the cases of Oklahoma Question 711 and California Proposition 8, to deny to other Americans the right to legally marry.

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<sup>8</sup> The passage from Matthew is the New American Bible translation, as used by Garcia in his statement.



The Bible, however, has not been the exclusive tool of anti-gay activists in fights over such ballot initiatives. In the case of Proposition 8, another group of bishops took a stand that directly opposed that of California's Roman Catholic hierarchy. On September 10, bishops of the Episcopal Church in California officially declared their unanimous opposition to the divisive ballot initiative. The bishops went on record in two separate press conferences—one held at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the other at the Cathedral Center of Saint Paul in Los Angeles—as well as in the form of a written statement. The written statement began, “As Episcopal Bishops of California, we are moved to urge voters to vote ‘No’ on Proposition 8. Jesus calls us to love rather than hate, to give rather than to receive, to live into hope rather than fear.” Marc Handley Andrus, the Bishop of California, similarly cited the Christian messiah in his public statement at the Grace Cathedral press conference: “Living like Jesus means standing in solidarity with the marginalized of our world. For me, voting no on Proposition 8 is a way I can stand in solidarity with the marginalized, in this case with LGBT brothers and sisters, and continue my journey with Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Duke Helfand reported on the Episcopal bishops' stand for the *Los Angeles Times* (“California's top Episcopal bishops”). The text of the written statement was made available online by the Episcopal Diocese of California (Episcopal Diocesan Bishops of California, “Statement”); the quote from the statement is taken from that source. The Episcopal Diocese also made available an additional report on the two press conferences (“California Bishops”); the Andrus quote is taken directly from that report. The bishops' collective statement was signed by Marc Handley Andrus, Bishop of California; Barry L. Beisner, Bishop of Northern California; J. Jon Bruno, Bishop of Los Angeles; Mary Gray-Reeves, Bishop of El Camino Real; Jerry A. Lamb, Provisional Bishop of San Joaquin; James R. Mathes, Bishop of San Diego; Steven Charleston, Assisting Bishop, Diocese of California; Chester Talton, Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of Los Angeles; and Sergio Carranza, Bishop Assistant, Diocese of Los Angeles.

It may seem strange that Roman Catholic Bishop Richard J. Garcia and Episcopal Bishop Marc Handley Andrus would both explicitly cite Jesus—the central figure of the Christian New Testament—to completely opposite political ends. But this paradox is neither new nor unusual. In fact, since Anita Bryant, Tim LaHaye, and other Bible-quoting leaders of the Christian right began the current wave of anti-gay political activism in the 1970s, they have been countered by a large and theologically diverse body of pro-gay activists who have tried to reclaim the Bible as an ally in their cause.

The use of the Bible as a tool by opposing factions of a single contentious issue is not a new phenomenon in American cultural history. Racial segregation, capital punishment, abortion, women's suffrage, the legalization of interracial marriage, the integration of Roman Catholics into American society, the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools—these and other issues have all been debated by foes who, both pro and con, have mined rhetorical ammunition from the Bible.<sup>10</sup> The persistence of such debates in the American public square testifies to the continuing power the Bible holds as a cultural touchstone.

This dissertation takes a closer look at the use of the Bible in two particular debates within the United States: first, the debate over the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, and second, the contemporary debate over gay rights. This study incorporates two primary theses. First, I argue that the contemporary religious right, in its anti-gay use of the Bible, is replicating the hermeneutical practices used by those nineteenth century Christian activists who both opposed the abolitionist movement and defended the institution of slavery. My second thesis closely parallels the first: I argue that the contemporary activists who reclaim the Bible, and thereby put it to use as a pro-gay instrument, are standing in the same hermeneutical

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle catalogue many of these debates in *The Bible Tells Me So*.

tradition as those nineteenth century Christians who turned the Bible into a source of pro-abolitionist inspiration. This study, thus, is essentially about the acts of interpreting texts and putting those interpretations to use in the public sphere.

In the first chapter, I lay out the historical and conceptual groundwork for this study. Because the Bible is a key, yet problematic, presence in this dissertation, I begin by reviewing the evolution and the ironies of the biblical canon—or more properly, canons. I also develop a definition of the phenomenon I call “biblical absolutism,” and connect this concept to the study of human difference, privilege, and marginalization. After considering the role of interpretive communities in biblical interpretation, I conclude the chapter by presenting a conceptual model—the “four Bible” model—which I have developed as a tool for better understanding the absolutist hermeneutics that undergirds anti-abolitionist and anti-gay rhetoric.

The second chapter incorporates a thorough catalogue of the more than thirty biblical passages used by anti-abolitionist activists in their public discourses. There is a comparative thrust to this chapter, because it juxtaposes this “slavemaster’s Bible” with the biblical passages that have been, and continue to be, used in anti-gay discourse. In addition to examining the biblical passages used by each camp, this chapter also explores what I term the “secondary rhetoric” of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay readers of the Bible.

The third chapter is a comparative analysis of the biblical hermeneutics practiced by nineteenth century abolitionists and contemporary pro-gay thinkers. In this chapter I identify seven general strategies which these two groups hold in common as each engages the biblical text; the bulk of the chapter is devoted to looking at each of these strategies, and the practice thereof, in greater detail. The chapter concludes with a close tandem reading of a milestone of abolitionist literature which I have paired with a significant contemporary pro-gay text; this

reading focuses on how each text engages with Bible and addresses the use of the Bible in society. Like the immediately preceding chapter, this chapter brings a concerted focus to two very specific “genres” of writing.

The fourth and final chapter attempts to widen out the focus of the two preceding chapters by bringing in a fresh box of “tools” with which to reexamine the texts and issues raised thus far in the overall study. I also move this study from a strictly United States context to a broader international focus by seeking these tools from outside the western hemisphere. To be specific, I consider the possible connections that link the hermeneutics of the American abolitionist and gay rights movements to three other currents of thought: first, the *ubuntu* theology championed by Desmond Tutu, a leader of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; second, the minjung theology of South Korea’s Christian communities; and third, the philosophy of hermeneutics developed by German scholar Hans-Georg Gadamer. The overall goal of the fourth chapter is not to generate some sort of tidy and comfortable conclusion about the uses of the Bible in public spheres, but rather to generate still more provocative questions and avenues for further exploration.

Looming over the entirety of this project, of course, is the Bible itself. Brian Britt has noted that the Bible “permeates law, literature, thought, and action for all inheritors of the Western tradition” (70). For the sake of this project, my interest in the Bible is specifically in this role as a seminal cultural icon—as a text which continues to command attention on a global scale. My intent is neither to promote nor deny any purely religious doctrines about the Bible. For example, while I accept it as a given that a significant number of the authors I cite believe the Bible to be a work produced through some manner of supernatural agency, I offer no opinion with regard to such beliefs. My concern, rather is how people interpret the Bible, and how the

power of these interpretive acts impacts both public policy and private lives. And that impact is very real. These interpretive acts have emboldened the slavemaster to savagely whip his human chattel, and yet have also empowered a slave to make an escape and begin a journey to freedom; these acts have given vigor to an attempt to strip gay couples of their right to the legal benefits of marriage, and yet have also fired the passion of those who stand in solidarity with these gay couples. In the act of biblical interpretation lies a unique and curious power; I invite the reader to accompany me as I explore and chart the vectors and surges of this power.

## **2.0 CHAPTER ONE: DIFFERENCE, PRIVILEGE, AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

In a sermon delivered at the First Independent Church of Baltimore in 1819, William Ellery Channing offered a cutting opinion on the potential risk involved in biblical interpretation:

We indeed grant, that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we ask any honest man to look back on the history of the church, and say, whether the renunciation of it be not still more dangerous [. . .]. We grant, that the passions continually, and sometimes fatally, disturb the rational faculty in its inquiries into revelation. The ambitious contrive to find doctrines in the Bible, which favor their love of dominion. (54)

The ensuing two centuries have amply borne out Channing's prophetic warning. Consider, for example, the previously cited use of the Bible by those religious leaders who supported California's Proposition 8. In that case, an entrenched conservative ecclesiastic hierarchy cited the Bible as they encouraged the heterosexual majority to exercise "dominion" over the homosexual minority—a dominion in which that minority was stripped of a right which the majority continues to enjoy.

The fight against gay marriage in California, and, more generally, against gay rights throughout the United States, is a fight which is closely tied to practices of biblical interpretation. Moreover, this anti-gay crusade has united a theologically diverse alliance. This alliance has

included leaders and spokespersons from the Roman Catholic, evangelical Christian (i.e. Protestant fundamentalist), Latter-day Saint (i.e. Mormon), and Orthodox Jewish traditions. This is a remarkable alliance in light of both the theological differences and sometimes hostile rhetoric which has existed among these groups. Take, for example, the relationship between the Latter-day Saint and Protestant fundamentalist communities. As Amy Sullivan noted, the specific doctrinal differences between these two groups loomed as a factor in 2008 presidential politics—specifically, as a potential stumbling block to Mitt Romney, the Mormon former governor of Massachusetts who unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for president. Observing that evangelical voters make up a sizeable voting bloc within the Republican Party, Sullivan stated that “it is nearly impossible to overemphasize the problem evangelicals have with Mormonism [. . .]. To evangelicals, Mormonism isn't just another religion. It's a cult.” Sullivan’s blunt assessment has been buttressed by quantifiable research. A Pew poll found that 36 percent of evangelicals said that they are less likely to vote for a candidate who is a Mormon—compared to 25 percent of all Americans (Neff). And yet, evangelicals find themselves on the same side of the anti-gay fight with Mormons. How is this possible? Is it simply an example of the adage “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” holding true, or is there a yet deeper truth at work?

I contend that there is, in fact, a complex discursive web undergirding this anti-gay religious alliance. The common strand which runs to all corners of this web is a phenomenon which I call biblical absolutism. Part of biblical absolutism is a particular way of reading the Bible. But biblical absolutism is more than merely a school of biblical interpretation; rather, it is a total worldview through which its adherents “read” not just the Bible, but all cultural phenomena. On a practical level, biblical absolutism fetishizes the Bible, valorizes authoritarianism, and justifies the marginalization of certain groups of people. This worldview

and its affiliated way of reading are not new; in fact, biblical absolutism has been a critical component of the rhetorical wars against both the abolitionist movement and the gay rights movement. In order to better explain my notion of biblical absolutism, I will, in this chapter, review the evolution of the biblical canon, as well as the “genealogy” of contemporary biblical absolutism. In addition, I will consider the phenomena of human difference and marginalization, and how these phenomena impact the practice of biblical interpretation. Finally, I will then describe my own “four Bible” model for understanding absolutist hermeneutics.

## **THE UNSTABLE CANON**

The Judeo-Christian Bible is a cultural touchstone that enjoys virtually universal recognition throughout the United States. Even those who possess the barest of “biblical literacy” could likely recall the traditional Christian division of the Bible into the Old and New Testaments, and many could likely name at least a few of the better-known books of the Bible. For many practitioners of absolutist hermeneutics, the phrase “The Bible says,” or some variant thereof, is frequently deployed for a number of arguments; these three simple words reflect the lofty status enjoyed by the Bible. This phrase, however, is weighted with assumptions, among them that “the Bible” is a stable and clearly recognizable entity. However, the Bible is less stable as a constructed text and more slippery as a concept than many may realize. Catholic scholar James Tunstead Burtchaell declares that the Bible “is the Church’s family album” (51), but a closer look at the history and construction of this “album” underscores the problematic nature of the very idea of the Bible.



The concept of the Bible as consisting of two parts—the Old and New Testaments—is problematic from the start. For religious Jews, the Bible consists only of the section which Christians call the Old Testament. Originally composed in Hebrew, this Jewish Bible is also known as the Tanakh—a name derived from an acronym based on the Hebrew names of the traditional divisions of the Jewish Bible.<sup>11</sup> The process by which the Tanakh came to be stabilized and recognized as canonical was long and complicated. By about 400 BCE Jewish communities had come to recognize the Torah—the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Pentateuch—as authoritative and binding. It took about another two centuries for the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so forth, known collectively by the Hebrew term *Nevi'im*—to attain such recognition. Last to gain entry to the Jewish/Hebrew “family album” was the third category of sacred texts: the *Kethuvim*, or Writings, a highly diverse body of literature which includes such texts as the Psalms, the Proverbs, and the book of Ruth. An attempt to authoritatively define the canon of the *Kethuvim* was not made until after 70 CE.<sup>12</sup> But simply choosing which books to include in the Tanakh—that is, in the Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Kethuvim*—was only part of the process. Equally critical to the evolution of this sacred anthology was the stabilization of a standard text of each individual book. James Sanders notes that the Jewish community apparently began this second process in the middle of the first century BCE, and had, for the most part, produced a standard text by the end of the first century CE (96). However, Sanders observes further that this textual stabilization only involved the

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<sup>11</sup> It is under the title *Tanakh* that the Jewish Publication Society issued a 1985 edition of the Jewish Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen L. Harris describes the evolution of the canon of the Hebrew Bible in his *Understanding the Bible* (14).

consonants of the Hebrew text; it was not until the ninth century CE that the vowel markers and accents of the text were definitively stabilized (97). Thus, the Jewish scriptural canon “inherited” by the emergent Christian community had not even reached its definitive form until centuries after the ministries of Jesus and Paul.

Equally complex was the evolution of the New Testament. For the earliest Christians, the Hebrew Bible in its then form was *the* Bible—the formation and canonization of a “new” scriptural testament was a process that, as with the “old” testament, took centuries (E. Clark 129). Stephen L. Harris notes that early attempts to establish a New Testament canon resulted in an “amazingly diverse” group of lists (*New Testament* 8). One such early list, the Muratorian Canon, appeared towards the end of the second, or perhaps as late as the third, century. While it included the four gospels, the Muratorian list excluded such texts as the second epistle of Peter and the third epistle of John, and included texts now considered noncanonical, such as the Apocalypse of Peter. The first definitive listing of the New Testament canon as it is accepted today did not occur until 367 CE, in the Easter Letter of Athanasius, a church leader in Alexandria. And yet, as late as the fifth century CE a Greek manuscript known as the Codex Alexandrinus still listed the extracanonical epistles 1 and 2 Clement as part of the New Testament (Harris, *New Testament* 9). Stabilization of the canon did not mark the end of the evolution of the biblical text; the text’s traditional division into chapters was the work of Stephen Langton (d. 1228), a lecturer at the University of Paris, and the current division into verses originated with printer Robert Stephanus, who issued a seminal Greek New Testament with numbered verses in 1551 (Metzger 79). Because the citation of chapter and verse is such a commonplace in biblically-oriented culture, the fact that verse division came so late in the Bible’s history adds yet another layer of irony to that history.

In the preceding paragraphs I discuss the evolution of the biblical “canon,” but in actuality there are many variant biblical canons beyond the obvious Jewish/Christian divide. The relationships among these variant canons further complicate any concept of the Bible as a clearly definable entity. Many of these relationships stem from the ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek version known as the Septuagint. Michael D. Coogan notes that scholars believe the earliest Greek versions of the Jewish Bible to have appeared in the third century CE; he adds that “[t]he relationship between the Greek and Hebrew textual traditions was complicated and fluid” (686). The Septuagint includes a number of texts that do not appear in the traditional Hebrew Bible, and which were ultimately regarded as noncanonical within the Jewish world. When the Protestant Reformation cleaved the western Christian world in the sixteenth century, these textual “stepchildren” of the Jewish Bible became an arena of conflict. The emergent Protestant movement rejected the canonicity of this marginal body of writings, which became known as the Apocrypha. In response, the embattled Roman Catholic Church affirmed the canonicity of these works at the 1546 council of Trent; these writings thus became known as “deuterocanonical” in the Roman Catholic tradition. Interestingly, the Anglican Christian tradition has steered a middle ground between Roman Catholicism and many Protestant denominations by accepting only the Hebrew canon and the New Testament as authoritative, but by also using some parts of the Apocrypha in its liturgy. Beyond Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and western Protestantism, the accepted biblical canons merely increase in diversity. The Greek Orthodox Church accepts not only the deuterocanonical books recognized by Catholicism, but some additional texts as well; the Ethiopic Christian tradition accepts yet a larger Bible, albeit distinguished between a “narrower” and “broader” canon.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce M. Metzger has reviewed both the history of the apocryphal/deuterocanonical

This diversity of canons has at times resulted in the publication of Bibles which, while bearing identical or near-identical titles on their spines, differ radically from each other once the covers are cracked open. Particularly interesting in this regard are some of the English-language Bibles that have been published for Roman Catholic consumers. In some of these Catholic Bibles, the deuterocanonicals—perhaps out of sensitivity to possible Protestant readers—are primly segregated and grouped into their own discrete section; in other versions, the deuterocanonicals are indiscriminately interspersed among the other books of the Catholic “Old” Testament. I have seen Catholic Bibles of the old Douay-Rheims translation which not only employ this latter organizational strategy, but which also use alternative names for some of the individual books; thus the Protestant 1 and 2 Samuel become the Catholic 1 and 2 Kings, the Protestant 1 and 2 Kings become the Catholic 3 and 4 Kings, the Protestant 1 and 2 Chronicles become the Catholic 1 and 2 Paralipomenon, and so forth.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a declaration that “the Bible says” something or other opens up the question as to which “Bible” is actually being referenced.

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books, as well as the variant canons among the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Orthodox, and Ethiopic Christian traditions (79).

<sup>14</sup> Catholic Bibles may often be distinguished by the presence of an official declaration of approval by one or more representatives of the ecclesiastic hierarchy. Such an official declaration may be given under the formal titles of *Imprimatur* or *Nihil Obstat*, together with the ecclesiastic rank and position of the individual granting the declaration. An example of a Catholic Bible with segregated deuterocanonicals is the 1993 *Good News Bible with Deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha*, published by the American Bible Society; an example of a Catholic Bible in which the deuterocanonicals are interspersed among the other Old Testament books is the 1990 *New Jerusalem Bible*, published by Doubleday; an example of a Douay-Reims Bible that uses the alternate Catholic names for individual biblical books is *The Holy Bible*, published in 1899 by John Murphy and reprinted in 1971 by TAN.

The Protestant Reformation and its aftermath were not the last events to shake up the concepts of Bible and canon. The eighteenth century witnessed the beginning of a wave of what one might call “neo-Christian” religious movements. By “neo-Christian” I refer to sects and trends which, while grounded in the centuries old Christian tradition, broke from or added to traditional Christianity in much the same way that the early Christian movement broke from and added to ancient Judaism. One of the forerunners of this neo-Christian wave was Emanuel Swedenborg, who lived from 1688 to 1772.

The son of a Swedish Lutheran bishop, Swedenborg enjoyed a distinguished career as a scientist and public servant. After his reputation was so established, Swedenborg’s life took a remarkable turn: he “became what today would be called a medium, one who has contact with discarnate spirit entities. He claimed that in his visions, he traveled to spirit realms and from spirit entities (primarily angels) gained revelatory knowledge of the nature of life, life after death, and God” (Melton 147). Swedenborg’s claimed spiritual experiences were the basis of voluminous writings, which he composed in Latin. Followers of Swedenborg’s vision came to regard his spiritual writings as a sort of “third testament,” and ultimately these writings, together with the Judeo-Christian Bible, became the basis for a new branch of Christianity which is alternately called the New Church or the Church of the New Jerusalem; three separate denominations of this religion have headquarters in the United States.<sup>15</sup> To the New Church faithful, Swedenborg is much more than a Martin Luther or a John Calvin; no mere reformer, he

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<sup>15</sup> These three Swedenborgian denominations, as reported in the sixth edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Religion*, are the General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America, headquartered in Newton, Massachusetts; the General Church of the New Jerusalem, headquartered in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania; and the Lord’s New Church, also headquartered in Bryn Athyn (Melton 669-70).

is rather seen as a revelator, more in the mold of an Ezekiel or a John of Patmos. Indeed, for Swedenborgians the “second coming” of Christ to which so many Catholics, Protestants, and eastern Orthodox Christians look forward was indeed accomplished in the writings of Swedenborg (Meyers 4). One of America’s most notable New Churchwomen was Helen Keller, the celebrated champion for the cause of disabled persons. In her spiritual manifesto *My Religion*, Keller hailed Swedenborg as “a prophet sent by God” (81). In the New Testament account of Jesus’ crucifixion Keller even found a prophetic foreshadowing of Swedenborg’s own Latin third testament:

Above the Cross was placed the inscription, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, foreshadowing as it were the time when the Lord would satisfy longing souls with His likeness, revealing the hidden meanings of the Hebrew Word, and the Greek New Testament in Greek, and giving the Spiritual Sense in Latin. In this language Swedenborg wrote, translating, as the Lord taught him, the symbols of the Bible into principles of practical life for the use and happiness of mankind. (112)

The writings of Swedenborg, together with the small but still vital branch of Christianity to which they gave birth, thus raise questions which further challenge ideas about the Judeo-Christian scriptural canon. How, for example, does one question the validity of a purported third testament without in turn raising questions about the legitimacy of the “second” (i.e. “New”) testament? And might there be further candidates for the stature of “third” testament?

In fact, Swedenborg seems to have opened the door to a whole family of claimants to the position of “third testament.” Consider, for example, Mary Baker Eddy’s 1875 opus *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, which is still used, alongside the Bible, in the liturgy of

Christian Science churches.<sup>16</sup> But perhaps the most remarkable neo-Christian “third testament” is the Book of Mormon, first published in 1830. Joseph Smith, the key figure behind the appearance of this book, claimed that it was a translation of documents from ancient, and long since fallen, American civilizations. Furthermore, Smith claimed that he had translated the purported ancient text with divine assistance—he even claimed that an angelic being named Moroni had prepared him for his task as discoverer and translator of the ancient documents. Ultimately Smith came to be seen as a divinely ordained prophet by the faithful who rallied to him and to his new scriptural testament.

The Book of Mormon became the cornerstone of a neo-Christian movement which would ultimately spread throughout the globe. J. Gordon Melton refers collectively to the individual sects and denominations within this movement as the Latter-day Saint family (125). Although Melton has documented more than sixty such individual groups (589-613), the vast bulk of the Latter-day Saint movement is concentrated in the family’s largest and most influential denomination, formally known as the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints, and popularly known as the Mormon Church or simply as the LDS Church. Headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, the LDS Church reported in 2007 that its global membership was approaching the thirteen million mark (“Church Statistics”).

The LDS community has directly challenged more traditional Christian notions of Bible and canon more directly, aggressively, and successfully than any other neo-Christian movement.

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<sup>16</sup> The Church of Christ, Scientist offers a description of its weekly services on its official website.

The introduction<sup>17</sup> to the LDS Church's own official 1990 edition of the Book of Mormon opens with a blunt claim: "The Book of Mormon is a volume of holy scripture comparable to the Bible." Even more challenging to traditional Christianity is a direct quote from Joseph Smith which is also included in the introduction: "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding its precepts, than by any other book." Eventually Smith's ministry would produce two additional volumes which are today acclaimed as sacred scripture by the LDS Church: Doctrine and Covenants, which largely consists of a series of texts written in the form of revelations given directly from the divine to Smith and others; and the Pearl of Great Price, a much shorter anthology of miscellaneous texts, among them a purported translation by Smith of writings from the ancient biblical patriarch Abraham.<sup>18</sup> For Mormons, thus, the term "holy scripture" embraces the Protestant Bible—but not the Roman Catholic deuterocanonical books—together with the Book of Mormon and its two companion volumes. Within Mormon culture, which has generated its own distinctive religious vocabulary over the course of nearly two centuries, these four recognized volumes are known as the "standard works" (McConkie 764). It is worthy of note that the Mormon "standard works" have continued to evolve long after the death of the church's founding prophet; in fact, the most recent of the claimed revelations that make up the Doctrine and Covenants was added in 1978. The LDS Church directs an ambitious international missionary program, ensuring that its distinctive scriptural canon will continue to

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<sup>17</sup> The introduction is part of a collection of materials in this edition's unpaginated opening section.

<sup>18</sup> Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price have been published together as a single, but separately paginated, volume by the LDS Church (*Doctrine and Covenants*).



gain wider visibility among the larger Christian world. And yet, The LDS Church finds its own canon challenged just as it challenges the canon of more established Christianity; many of the schismatic groups within the larger Latter-day Saint “family” have produced their own additional “testaments”—texts which claim to further supplement both the Bible and Book of Mormon.

From the early formation of the Torah to the evolution of the distinctive Latter-day Saint “standard works” and beyond, the history of the scriptural canons—and I do use *canons* in the plural form intentionally—of the greater Judeo-Christian tradition is a complex and curious narrative. This greater Judeo-Christian tradition of which I write includes both ancient and modern Judaism in its various branches, the major branches and sub-branches of “traditional” Christianity, and “neo-Christian” movements, such as Mormonism and Christian Science, together with their own offshoots. Even the various sects and movements within, or related to, Islam might be considered a part of this larger Judeo-Christian tradition. The various scriptural canons of each group and subgroup help to define these various communities. A clearly defined canon serves as a common ground upon which a specific faith community can rally.

The biblical absolutism which I have described is not the exclusive province of one, or even of a few, faith communities within this broad Judeo-Christian tradition. Nonetheless, absolutism is a persistent and widely dispersed phenomenon which may be encountered in communities as diverse as Orthodox Judaism, Pentecostal Protestantism, Mormonism, and Roman Catholicism. Moreover, within some of the same communities where absolutism is embraced, one may also encounter individuals and collectives who reject the philosophy and practice of absolutism. But absolutism is ultimately tied to the concepts of canon and authority. When viewed in light of the broadest possible historic sweep, the concepts of the “Bible” and “canon” are, as indicated in the preceding paragraphs, much more complex and problematic than

the faithful within a specific faith community may recognize. But for a practitioner of biblical absolutism, his particular “Bible”—be it the Tanakh, the Catholic canon, or the Mormon “standard works”—is imbued with a very special type of authority. In order to better understand the nature of that authority and the ramifications of its entry into the public sphere, it is necessary to understand the genealogy of absolutist hermeneutics.

### **THE ROOTS AND BRANCHES OF BIBLICAL ABSOLUTISM**

Before tracing the genealogy of absolutism, I wish to make it clear that I do not consider the phenomenon I call “biblical absolutism” to be the same as either Christian fundamentalism or biblical literalism. Biblical literalism is an interpretive strategy that is employed in both absolutism and fundamentalism; absolutism and fundamentalism are interconnected, but not identical, religious and cultural currents. Thus, biblical literalism, absolutism, and Christian fundamentalism are related phenomena whose roots lie in the history of biblical formation and interpretation.

Some of the earliest recorded accounts of scriptural absolutism in action can be found in the Tanakh itself—particularly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books, which cover the years from 539 to circa 430 BCE, tell a narrative about the return of the Jewish people to their homeland following a period of exile. The two books bear the name of two critical Jewish leaders of the period: the priest Ezra, who represents religious authority, and the governor

Nehemiah, who represents civil authority. The close relationship between these linked books leads David J. A. Clines to refer to them as a unit—the “narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah.”<sup>19</sup>

For the purposes of my argument, what is most remarkable about Ezra-Nehemiah is the narrative’s depiction of a unity of purpose between religious and civil authority in their joint use of sacred scripture. In one episode, for example, all the people of Israel gather in a public square to hear Ezra read from “the book of the law of Moses” (Nehemiah 8:1). The event is cathartic for this post-exilic community, and the author of the narrative makes clear that religious and civil authority stand united before the people: “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law” (Nehemiah 8:9).

At this point in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, it is probably easy for any reader to empathize with the community therein depicted. The Israelite people, restored to their ancestral territory after a traumatic diaspora, come together as a community and find common ground in the public affirmation of their sacred scripture. But here is a dark side to this otherwise poignant tale, and that darkness stems from the scriptural tradition endorsed by the twin religious and civil authority of the post-exilic community:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you [. . .]—and when the LORD

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<sup>19</sup> Clines 699. In fact, Clines provides a single introduction (699-701) for the two books in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, further reinforcing the perception of the two books as a single entity. All of the quotations from both Ezra and Nehemiah in this chapter are taken from the New Revised Standard translation as presented in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*.

your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons [. . .]. (Deuteronomy 7:1-3 [NRSV])

In the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, Ezra is depicted as paraphrasing part above the above command from the law of Moses (Ezra 9:10-12). Outraged over the existence of inter-ethnic marriages among the post-exilic community, the priest is uncompromising in his judgment upon, and demands of, those who have partaken in such unions: “Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, ‘You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives’” (Ezra 10:10, 11). In obedience to the priest, those guilty of inter-ethnic marriage sent away their foreign wives together with their children (Ezra 10:44). The Ezra-Nehemiah narrative is thus imbued with a lacerating irony: the men of Israel, having returned from a painful exile, bow to the twin specters of scriptural literalism and ecclesiastic authority, and in this submission condemn their own wives and children to yet another exile.

All the texts of the Judeo-Christian are not so absolutist in tone as the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. In fact, both the Tanakh and the New Testament are rich in texts which seem to critique and even condemn scriptural absolutism. But such mitigating texts are interspersed among texts which seem to further the absolutist agenda of an Ezra. Consider, for example, the apostle Paul’s pointed hectoring of the early Christian church in Galatia. Condemning those “who want to pervert the gospel of Christ,” Paul thunders, “if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, let that one be accursed!” (Galatians 6: 7, 9 [NRSV]). As

Ezra demanded ethnic purity, so too does Paul demand doctrinal purity. And, like Ezra, Paul forcefully exerts his ecclesiastic authority; before condemning the heretical perverters of the gospel, he emphasizes the gravity of his own position as “an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Galatians 1:1 [NRSV]).

The seeds of the absolutist current within Christendom thus lie in the Bible itself—in those particular texts which valorize a slavish adherence to the commands of older scriptures, which are uncompromising in their demands for purity, which celebrate an unquestioning prostration before religious authority, and which tolerate the marginalization and abuse of entire groups of people. This absolutist current made itself felt during the long process of the formation of the variant biblical canons. Those church leaders—such as the above cited Athanasius—who helped shape the variant biblical canons played a policing role comparable to those played by the priest Ezra and the apostle Paul. Like Ezra and Paul, the canon shapers often demonstrated a commitment to the ideals of exclusivity and authority—the hallmarks of absolutism. Willis Barnstone, in an introduction to *The Other Bible*, his own anthology of ancient religious texts, is harshly critical of the work of these ancient canon police:

The exclusion of many texts was often as arbitrary and dubious as was the inclusion of such magnificent and dangerous books as Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs [. . .]. [W]e can say categorically that the Bible, with the absence of sacred texts from the entire intertestamental period, with its acceptance of a small and repetitious canon for the New Testament, with the exclusion of all later Christian Apocrypha, and the total rejection of Gnostic scriptures, has given us a highly censored and distorted version of ancient religious literature (xviii, xix).

Despite such ancient censorship, editors such as Barnstone, with *The Other Bible*, and Ron Cameron, with his anthology *The Other Gospels*, have made some of these “lost” alternative scriptures available to contemporary readers. Anthologies such as these recover those voices which were “silenced” in the shaping of the standard canons.

The definitive establishment of the Christian biblical canon of western Europe did not mark an end to the evolution of the absolutist impulse within Christendom. That impulse was furthered by the evolution of the Roman Catholic religious hierarchy—in particular, the office of Pope. In the papacy and the assembly of bishops, the Catholic Church had ecclesiastic institutions which would continue to exert policing power as the centuries unfolded. As with the biblical figure of Ezra, this regulatory authority would be employed in conjunction with appeals to the authority of sacred scripture.

Despite this policing presence of the Catholic hierarchy, early interpreters of the Bible managed to bring considerable richness and diversity to their work. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes that ancient and medieval Christian scholars viewed scriptural texts as incorporating four aspects: the literal (or historical), tropological (or moral), allegorical, and anagogical (or future-oriented) meanings. This fourfold approach produced an interpretive mode which was dynamic and open-ended. However, Fiorenza notes that this tradition was challenged by the Protestant Reformation’s doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”): the idea that the Bible alone is the foundation of Christian faith and that it is self-interpreting (28). Moreover, *sola scriptura* was a direct repudiation of the exclusive religious authority claimed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The Reformation’s successors took the concept of *sola scriptura* further with the idea of biblical infallibility: “Thus they could use the Bible as the infallible foundation and proof-text for a set of dogmatic convictions. Interpretation was now a set of rules allowing us to read the text in such a

way as to confirm our dogmatic pre-understanding” (Fiorenza 28). *Sola scriptura* helped to midwife the births of the new Christian sects of the Reformation, and also to generate the roots of contemporary Christian fundamentalism.

As noted above, biblical absolutism is a mode of thinking which valorizes authoritarianism. The doctrine of biblical infallibility, with its emphasis on the overwhelming authority of the Bible, has been a key component of the manifestation of absolutism within the Protestant world. But the existence of the Papacy and its allied institutions guaranteed the evolution of a parallel strand of absolutism within Roman Catholicism before, during, and after the Protestant Reformation. Whereas Protestant absolutism valorized the Bible—*sola scriptura*—as its only completely binding authority, the absolutist elements within Roman Catholicism saw the authority of the Bible as working in concert with the ecclesiastic authority of the Popes. In other words, Protestant absolutism pointed towards a single font of authority, and Catholic absolutism pointed to a dual font. In either case, however, the practitioners of absolutism were often inclined to employ that authority fetish quite ruthlessly.

Exemplary of Catholic absolutism in post-Reformation Europe was the persecution of Galileo. The Italian scientist incurred the wrath of Rome when he championed the then-radical theory that the earth revolved around the sun. This heliocentric model of the solar system appeared to contradict certain passages of the Bible, which seemingly described the sun as being in motion around a stationary Earth. A key defender of geocentrism, and thus foe of Galileo, was Roman Catholic cardinal Robert Bellarmine. The cardinal’s attack on heliocentrism crystallizes the difference between Protestant and Catholic absolutism. In a 1615 letter to fellow clergyman Paolo Antonio Foscarini, Bellarmine declared Galileo’s heliocentric model to be “a very dangerous thing, likely not only to irritate all scholastic philosophers and theologians, but

also to harm the Holy Faith by rendering Holy Scripture false” (174). But it is not merely the Holy Scripture that Bellarmine perceives to be under attack. Noting that the Council of Trent “prohibits interpreting Scripture against the common consensus of the Holy Fathers,” the cardinal continues:

[I]f Your Paternity [i.e. Foscarini] wants to read not only the Holy Fathers, but also the modern commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Joshua, you will find all agreeing in the literal interpretation that the sun is in heaven and turns around the earth with great speed, and that the earth is very far from heaven and sits motionless at the center of the world [i.e. the cosmos]. Consider now, with your sense of prudence, whether the church can tolerate giving scripture a meaning contrary to the Holy Fathers and to all the Greek and Latin commentators. (175)

Although as a Catholic leader Bellarmine could not ascribe to the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, he does explicitly support a “literal interpretation” of all biblical passages which touch on the heliocentrism controversy. Furthermore, Bellarmine valorizes not just biblical authority, but also the authority of Catholicism’s “Holy Fathers” and of the church’s officially recognized body of biblical commentary. It is his selective literalism, combined with his valorization of recognized authority, that marks Bellarmine’s defense of heliocentrism as being squarely in the absolutist tradition.<sup>20</sup> Because Bellarmine spent much of his life defending Catholicism against

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<sup>20</sup> There is today an active network of Christian geocentrists who continue to promote the astronomical model championed by Cardinal Bellarmine over three centuries ago. Exemplary of modern geocentrists’ work is Marshall Hall’s 1991 book *The Earth Is Not Moving*, whose cover blurb declares, “Over 400 years of deception exposed! The Bible told the truth all along.”



Protestant polemics (Fantoli 177), his words further demonstrate that absolutism may manifest itself in different branches of Christianity even when those branches quarrel with each other.

After the Protestant Reformation, a second major European movement which proved seminal to modern Protestant fundamentalism was the eighteenth century Enlightenment. During this century figures such as Voltaire, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft brought critical eyes to the institutions and orthodoxies of past centuries. The religious establishments of Europe and the New World were not immune to this new wave of rationalist thought. And yet, there was a rich irony to the conflict between Enlightenment thinkers and the religious orthodoxies—in particular, the Protestant orthodoxies—of their day.

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Relying, like Galileo's seventeenth-century opponents, on a literal reading of selected biblical passages, Hall denounces the heliocentric model of the solar system as "a Satanic counterfeit" (20). Hall serves as president of The Fair Education Foundation, which maintains an Internet site dedicated to combating both heliocentrism and Darwinian evolution, although the site's URL ([www.fixedearth.com](http://www.fixedearth.com)) seems to indicate an emphasis on the former issue. Also promoting geocentrism online is the Association for Biblical Astronomy; this organization, which also uses the name "The Biblical Astronomer," also makes clear its intentions via its URL ([www.geocentricity.com/](http://www.geocentricity.com/)). Although one might be tempted to dismiss both websites as clever and elaborate parodies, the size, scope, and consistency of the material presented on each site remain impressive; my inclination is to accept each presentation as sincere, regardless of scientific merit. In fact, the "Credo of the Biblical Astronomer," which is available on the Association for Biblical Astronomy site, contains language which is well in keeping with more "mainstream" manifestations of biblical absolutism. The "Credo" declares that the Association was founded "on the premise that the only absolutely trustworthy information about the origin and purpose of all that exists and happens is given by God, our Creator and Redeemer, in his infallible, preserved word, the Holy Bible. All scientific endeavor which does not accept this revelation from on high without any reservations, literary, philosophical or whatever, we reject as already condemned in its unfounded first assumptions."

As J. M. Roberts observes, the Protestant reformers had shaken the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and replaced it with authorities of their own; but “they could not undo the work of undermining religious authority which they had begun and which the men of the Enlightenment were to carry much further” (663). Unsurprisingly, later generations of Protestant fundamentalists would characterize the Enlightenment in the most negative terms. Francis Schaeffer, for example, asserted, “The central ideas of the Enlightenment stand in complete antithesis to Christian truth. More than this, they are an attack on God and his character” (33, 34).

Thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin helped bring the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment to the United States. The Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationalism was one of the key pillars of the religious current known as modernism. Religious modernism—a phenomenon which, although it may share some characteristics of, is quite distinct from literary modernism<sup>21</sup>—was a major force during the late

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<sup>21</sup> Beckson and Ganz note that, in a literary context, “the term *Modernism* refers to the literature and general culture of, roughly, the first part of the twentieth century.” They caution, however, that dating literary modernism is not simple: “At its narrowest the period covers about thirty-five years from approximately 1910 to the end of World War II; at its broadest it embraces the period from the mid-1870’s to the present” (164). Beckson and Ganz observe that some define literary modernism “by its rejection of the literary diction and techniques of the previous period and by its opposition to the economic and social values of bourgeois society”; they note further that “a fascination with fresh, experimental techniques marks the work of many Modernist writers” (164, 165). In contrast, the “modernist style of religious thinking” described by Robert Fuller is characterized by attempts to harmonize American Protestantism with advances in evolutionary and psychological theory (112). It might be said that literary modernism and religious modernism are each manifestations of a larger cultural modernism.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Besides rationalism, there were two other key influences on religious modernism: the theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin, and the branch of biblical studies known as higher criticism. Religious modernism found its institutional expression in the liberal Protestantism of America's main denominations. Robert Fuller notes that this style of American Christianity "reached the zenith of its cultural influence between 1880 and 1925. The mainline denominations, buoyed by the continued advances of the natural and social sciences, prepared to enter a progressive era in which reason and faith would join together" (108). However, this modernist movement helped inspire an opposing religious movement: modern Christian fundamentalism.

Christian fundamentalism championed several key doctrines, among them the divinity of Jesus Christ, his miraculous conception via a virgin mother, and the literal historicity of the biblical creation story. Such beliefs, which were seen as being under assault from religious modernism, were tied to the overarching doctrine of the infallibility of the biblical texts. Christian fundamentalism evolved as a movement and, over the course of several decades, manifested itself in a series of events and documents. The events included conferences of like-minded believers; such gatherings took place in Allegheny, Pennsylvania in 1895, Boston in 1901, and Chicago in 1914 (Fuller 123, 24). One of the first critical texts to articulate Fundamentalist doctrine was the annotated study Bible edited by C. I. Scofield and first published in 1909.<sup>22</sup> Robert Fuller notes that Scofield's opus was characterized by "copious references in the margins that, to the average reader, appear to be part of God's original text." Fuller adds that "what readers actually got was a wholesale imposition of fundamentalist

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<sup>22</sup> A new edition of the *Scofield Reference Bible* retained the original 1909 introduction (iii, iv).

assumptions on the text” (125). The second critical text in the emergence of Christian fundamentalism was actually a multivolume anthology known simply as *The Fundamentals*. Funded by wealthy businessman Lyman Stewart and edited by R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, *The Fundamentals* included the work of over sixty authors. The anthology, which attacked such modernist pillars as Darwinian evolution, was released in twelve volumes from 1910 to 1915. Ultimately this religious *magnum opus* “solidified the name and ideology” of the fundamentalist movement.<sup>23</sup> The conflict between fundamentalists and modernists continued into the 1920s and 30s. Significant milestones in the ongoing struggle included the 1925 Scopes trial over the teaching of evolution in schools (Falwell, Dobson, and Hindson 85) and the drafting of the 1933 *Humanist Manifesto*, which fundamentalists would regard as secular humanism’s answer to the Judeo-Christian Bible (Utter and Storey 27).

As I have noted above, biblical absolutism and Christian fundamentalism are not identical phenomena. Biblical absolutism existed in pre-fundamentalist Protestantism. And during the decades that the modern Protestant fundamentalist movement was coalescing, absolutism continued to manifest itself in non-Protestant wings of the larger Judeo-Christian world. But Protestant fundamentalism, while not the sole locus of biblical absolutism, is nonetheless absolutist to its very core. The annotations of Scofield, the articles in *The Fundamentals*, and the other key documents of the emerging fundamentalist movement all fetishized the authority of the Protestant Bible much as Cardinal Bellarmine had fetishized the

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<sup>23</sup> Fuller 125. However, Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey assert that the use of the term “fundamentalist” to describe the adherent of a particular belief system was first used in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws, who was the editor of a northern Baptist periodical known as *The Watchman-Examiner* (25). *The Fundamentals* was eventually released in a four volume edition by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles in 1917; this edition was reprinted by Baker Book House in 1998.

twin authority of the Holy Scriptures and Holy Fathers. And like Bellarmine, the leaders of emergent fundamentalism relied on the literal readings of selected biblical passages in order to defend their ideology.

A key figure linking the early Christian fundamentalist movement to its later manifestations was writer and activist Francis Schaeffer. Michael S. Hamilton notes that Schaeffer's faith "had been formed in the furnace of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1930s." Until his death in 1984 Schaeffer led a ministry, grounded in the doctrines established by the founding fundamentalists, by which he mentored a new generation of fundamentalist activists. Hamilton observes further that Schaeffer's work impacted such figures as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Tim LaHaye; these men went on to become leaders in the new Christian Right which emerged in the late 1970s.

Schaeffer saw himself and his fellow Christian fundamentalists as engaged in a grand "battle on the stage of human history." Furthermore, he championed the Bible as the weapon with which fundamentalists must fight "the spiritual hosts of wickedness" (Schaeffer 25). Schaeffer's ideological heirs within the Christian fundamentalist movement carried his beliefs forward into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Key among these heirs was Jerry Falwell, who began taking on political causes in the 1970s. In 1979 Falwell founded the Moral Majority, an organization which became a major political organ of Christian fundamentalism. Like Schaeffer, Falwell saw the Bible as a weapon, and he wielded it against such targets as abortion rights, homosexuality, and the Equal Rights Amendment. "If a man stands by this book, vote for him," Falwell is reported to have said about the Bible. "If he doesn't, don't" (MSNBC.com staff). Although Falwell died in 2007, fellow travelers such as Pat Robertson,

James Dobson, and D. James Kennedy continue to further Falwell's particular brand of politically-oriented Christian fundamentalism, with a particular emphasis on anti-gay activism.

As noted above, Falwell-style Protestant fundamentalism has made a political alliance with the Roman Catholic and Latter-day Saint church hierarchies with regard to the issue of gay rights. One of the key elements that makes such an alliance possible is the biblical absolutism that undergirds the anti-gay politics of each party. It is worth considering how the absolutist elements within Roman Catholicism and Mormonism were evolving on parallel tracks during the decades when contemporary Protestant fundamentalism was growing. The absolutist mindset within Catholicism was valorized by the First Vatican Council, which took place from 1869 to 1870. This council produced *Pastor Aeternus*, a document which codified the doctrine of papal infallibility: the teaching that the Pope, when speaking *ex cathedra*—that is, in his official role “as the pastor and teacher of all Christians”—is empowered “with that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed to endow his Church” (qtd. in Ford 664). The council also made it clear that the infallible pronouncements of a Pope were not subject to any sort of democratic review within the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, clarified the infallibility doctrine by teaching that “the college of bishops, either assembled in council or dispersed throughout the world, could teach infallibly in communion with the Pope.” The council also “insisted that Catholics should give a ‘loyal submission of intellect and will’ not only to teachings given under the aegis of infallibility, but also to ‘the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*’” (Ford 664). The doctrines promulgated by these two Vatican councils served to thus augment the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

This ecclesiastic authority has been seized upon with vigor by Pope John Paul II (r. 1978-2005) and his successor, the currently reigning Benedict XVI; under these two popes the Catholic hierarchy has been particularly dedicated to an international crusade against gay rights. Exemplary of these men's absolutist approach to the issue of homosexuality is the 2003 document *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*. This manifesto was an official statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican body headed at that time by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger—the future Benedict XVI. The document was formally approved by John Paul II, who also ordered its publication. *Considerations* is absolutist in both its use of the Bible and its assertion of Roman Catholic ecclesiastic authority. The document declares as an uncontestable fact that “Sacred Scripture condemns homosexual acts ‘as a serious depravity,’” citing Romans 1:24-27 as its proof text. *Considerations* further states, “This same moral judgment is [. . .] unanimously accepted by Catholic Tradition.” The document, however, goes far beyond a mere theoretical condemnation of homosexuality:

In those situations where homosexual unions have been legally recognized or have been given the legal status and rights belonging to marriage, clear and emphatic opposition is a duty. One must refrain from any kind of formal cooperation in the enactment or application of such gravely unjust laws and, as far as possible, from material cooperation on the level of their application. In this area, everyone can exercise the right to conscientious objection.

Implicit in this call to political arms is the affirmation of the Second Vatican Council's demand of “loyal submission” on the part of Catholics to the hierarchy's agenda. *Considerations* is thus

not merely a volley in the Vatican's ongoing war against homosexuality; it is also an example of the continuing vigor of the absolutist trend within Roman Catholicism.

The evolution of the absolutist impulse within Mormonism mirrors the Roman Catholic history described above. The LDS Church's founding documents ascribe to Joseph Smith an authority comparable to the authority enjoyed within the Roman Catholic world by the Popes. In the LDS scripture known as Doctrine and Covenants, Smith is commissioned to be "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the Church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ" (21:1). Later in that same volume it is made clear that the appointment "to receive commandments and revelations" from God is exclusive to Smith for the rest of his life, and that "none else shall be appointed unto this gift except it be through him [i.e. Smith]" (43:3, 4). Smith's successors in the position of prophet-president of the Mormon Church have continued to assert their Pope-like prerogative; similarly, the highest ranking ecclesiastic bodies within the Mormon Church have asserted authority comparable to that claimed by the Roman Catholic assembly of cardinals and bishops. This LDS parallel to the authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic hierarchy is particularly evident in the Mormon Church's stance on gay rights. In 1995 the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the LDS Church delivered an indirect attack on the emerging push for same-sex marriage with an official statement entitled "The Family: A Proclamation to the World." Declaring that "that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God," the Mormon leaders further stated,

The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of



procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

As did the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the LDS hierarchy backed their opposition to homosexuality with a biblical reference—in this case, an allusion to Genesis 1:28. As the battle over Proposition 8 heated up in California, the LDS First Presidency issued a statement that was much more politically explicit than the 1995 “Proclamation.” The 2008 statement, which the hierarchy directed to be read to all Mormon congregations on June 29, reaffirmed the Church’s teaching that “[m]arriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God, and the formation of families is central to the Creator’s plan for His children.” The First Presidency promised that local LDS Church leaders would help congregants who wanted to become involved in the pro-Proposition 8 movement, and further asked the faithful to donate both “means and time to assure that marriage in California is legally defined as being between a man and a woman.”<sup>24</sup>

The coalition of Protestant fundamentalist, Roman Catholic, and Mormon individuals and groups was successful in its efforts to pass Proposition 8. In order to better understand how the groups in this alliance use the Bible as—to hearken back to the example of Francis Schaeffer—an anti-gay “weapon,” it is necessary to take a closer look at absolutist ideology.

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<sup>24</sup> The pro-Proposition 8 statement, entitled “Preserving Traditional Marriage and Strengthening Families,” was included in the body of statement posted on the official LDS media relations website (“California and Same-Sex Marriage”).

## THE ANATOMY OF ABSOLUTISM

Biblical absolutism encompasses two primary characteristics: first, an overwhelming emphasis on the role of authority in biblical interpretation; and second, the practice of selective literalism in reading the Bible. Francis Schaeffer expressed the Protestant fundamentalist take on that first characteristic when he exhorted his fellow believers, “[W]e must not allow the Bible to be weakened by any compromise in its authority, no matter how subtle the means” (39, 40). Roman Catholic and Mormon absolutists similarly valorize the authority of the Bible, although these groups also recognize additional sources of authority which work in concert with biblical authority. Nevertheless, for all three groups, the Bible remains a definitive source of moral and spiritual truth.

Russian theorist M. M. Bakhtin explored the relationship between discourse and authority in his 1935 study *The Dialogic Imagination*; his ideas seem particularly applicable to the phenomenon of biblical absolutism. Consider Bakhtin’s thoughts on what he called the “authoritative word,” or “authoritative discourse”:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected to a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers [. . .]. Its language is special (as it were, hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e. a name that must not be taken in vain [. . .]. (78)

For the biblical absolutist, the Bible is even more than the word of “the fathers”—rather, it is the work of *the* Father, the divine being of the absolutist’s particular theology. As Bakhtin continues to describe his concept of the “authoritative word” and its relationship with its readers, he seems to be accurately describing the relationship between the Bible and biblical absolutists. Noting that authoritative discourse “demands our unconditional allegiance,” Bakhtin continues:

Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority [. . .]. (78, 79)

Bakhtin’s notion of authoritative discourse being perceived as “a compact and indivisible mass” parallels the absolutist concept of the Bible. The phrase “the Bible says,” or variants of this phrase, implicitly configure “the Bible” as such a unified entity. The publication of a given biblical canon as a single-volume book masks the fact that the “book” is in fact a particular version of an anthology whose contents are contested, and which has a complex and problematic history.

Equally problematic is the appeal to authority within absolutist discourse. With regard to Protestant fundamentalist interpreters of the Bible, Daniel Patte has observed the following: “It is true that when they claim absolute authority for the text they actually claim authority for their own interpretations and for themselves” (81). To take Patte’s critique further, one could see the absolutist fetishization of biblical authority as a sort of mask for the absolutist’s personal desire to dominate, to be dominated, or both. The absolutist submits himself to the authority of the Bible, yet also reserves the right to summon that authority as a tool to crush another—as in the

case of the California Catholic bishops' appeal to the Bible in their pro-Proposition 8 rhetoric. Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti has described the human drive "to dominate or be dominated" as a "compulsion" (*Education* 60); indeed, some of the extreme rhetoric of the absolutist crusades against abolitionism and against gay rights seems to reflect such a psychology of addiction to authority.

Together with this authority fetishism, the second fundamental characteristic of biblical absolutism is the practice of selective literalism in reading the Bible. More generally speaking, literalism is a mode of reading that takes the words at their simplest face value. Thus, for the above-mentioned biblical geocentrists, passages such as the following are interpreted with unswerving literalism: "The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Biblical geocentrist Gordon Bane claims that this verse proves that the sun "literally, physically moves being carried daily around the earth by the rotating firmament" (168). Despite the certainty with which Bane presents his interpretation, geocentrism appears to be a marginal position among the most ardent adherents of biblical absolutism in the larger Christian world. This is because absolutists, while sharing Bane's strategy of literal interpretation, are in fact highly selective when it comes to which biblical verses receive such literal interpretation. Even Bob Jones University, one of the most uncompromising bastions of strict Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, concedes in an annex to its "University Creed" that the Bible contains figures of speech which are not to be interpreted literally, and offers the following verse as an example: "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap *their* hands" (Isaiah 55:12). Regarding that verse, I have yet to meet any biblical absolutist who admits to believing that trees will somehow sprout human

hands with which to literally clap in religious ecstasy. Beyond the giddy trees of Isaiah, there seem to be significant disagreements in absolutist circles as to which biblical verses should or should not be read literally. Historically these disagreements have led to sectarian and denominational differences over such issues as clerical celibacy, infant baptism, and the practice of glossolalia (i.e. “speaking in tongues”).

The reading strategy which I call selective literalism is a subordinate practice of the broader strategy known as proof-texting. John Burgess defines proof-texting as the “appeal to a select handful of [biblical] passages to justify our positions” (xv). At its simplest level, thus, proof-texting involves pointing out a specific biblical passage and declaring, “See! This proves my point. The Bible says it, and therefore it’s so!” In practice, however, proof-texting is more complex a practice than this formulaic declaration might indicate. Those who cite proof texts may interpret these particular texts either literally or more loosely—whichever better suits their purposes. Furthermore, literalistic proof-texting occurs in both direct and indirect modes. An example of literalistic proof-texting in direct mode is the anti-gay use of Leviticus 18:22—“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it *is* abomination.” Because this verse is a seemingly straightforward condemnation of male homosexual acts, anti-gay readers use it as “proof” that homosexuality is evil. On the other hand, consider how anti-gay readers of the Bible often cite the Genesis accounts of Adam and Eve as proof texts, despite the fact that homosexual activity is not mentioned therein. Anti-gay readers of biblical creation narrative frame it as a divine “Designer’s Manual” in which they see an implied, rather than an explicit,

condemnation of homosexual relations.<sup>25</sup> Yes, many anti-gay readers interpret the Adam and Eve narrative literally: Adam and Eve are seen as actual historical figures, and not merely as characters in a poetic allegory. But those who both subscribe to this literalistic reading and also use this account as anti-gay ammunition are engaging in literalistic proof-texting in the indirect, rather than direct, mode.

In addition to literal-direct and literal-indirect proof-texting, there is also a figurative mode of proof-texting. As noted above, even the most extreme fundamentalists accept that there are portions of the Bible which can only make sense if read as figurative language. And yet, texts that are thus interpreted as figurative language may still be used as proof texts. For example, Kathleen C. Boone has observed that some contemporary Christian fundamentalists look to the language of the book of Revelation as metaphorically describing such modern phenomena as tanks and nuclear warfare; such figuratively interpreted verses are used as proof texts for a believer's apocalyptic belief system (42, 43). Boone also draws attention to a curious fundamentalist reading of the ninth chapter of Revelation, which describes a plague of monstrous locusts set loose upon the earth. According to the biblical author, these are no ordinary locusts: "[T]heir faces *were* as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as *the teeth* of lions" (vv. 8, 9). Fundamentalist evangelist Leon Bates, in a 1980 study, reads these verses as follows: "Many MEN now have long hair like women! There has also been

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<sup>25</sup> I have taken the phrase "Designer's Manual," as used in reference to the Adam and Eve narratives, from anti-gay writer Erwin W. Lutzer (45). Anti-gay glosses on Genesis by Lutzer and others are explored further in the second chapter of this study.

a tremendous increase of homosexual, female impersonators.”<sup>26</sup> For Bates, this description of fanciful locusts becomes a damningly anti-gay prophecy. When seen in conjunction with anti-gay readings of Genesis and Leviticus, Bates’ gloss on the locusts of Revelation indicates the scope of the apparatuses of proof-texting. Whether used literally or metaphorically, however, proof texts always indicate a rigidity of purpose and a valorization of biblical authority.

John Burgess is highly critical of proof-texting, noting that it indicates that its adherents “lack the capacity to order scripture as a whole” (xv). L. William Countryman is equally critical of this compulsion that “everything ought to be proven by reference to the Bible, preferably with chapter and verse.” He continues: “This kind of proof-texting results in an approach to Scripture which at its worst is legalistic in the extreme” (18, 19). Countryman’s warning is echoed by a further observation of Burgess: “When scripture is seen primarily as bits of information, each univocal in meaning, it becomes language that we begin to manipulate for our own purposes” (36). The great irony of biblical absolutism is that its adherents claim that they defer completely to the unquestionable authority of the Bible, but in actuality they are, to borrow Burgess’ terminology, slicing the Bible into “bits of information” which are then deployed as weapons in a given debate.

As noted above, absolutism is a trans-sectarian phenomenon which has, over the course of centuries, manifested itself within many branches of the larger Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps the best way to understand the core of absolutism is to make a trans-sectarian survey of the official positions at some of the institutions which champion an absolutist worldview. Many such institutions exist within the Protestant fundamentalist world. Consider a few excerpts from

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<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in Boone 44. Bates continues to disseminate his apocalypse-oriented writings via the Bible Believers’ Evangelistic Association and its website.

statements put out by some of these institutions. The “Statement of Faith” of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association declares that the Association believes “the Bible to be the infallible Word of God, [. . .] and that it is of supreme and final authority.” The “Statement of Faith” of the National Association of Evangelicals uses similar language, declaring that organization’s belief that the Bible is “the only infallible, authoritative word of God.” The Southern Baptist Convention’s statement entitled “The Baptist Faith and Message” also addresses the issue of biblical authority, declaring that “all Scripture is true and trustworthy” and that the Bible “will remain to the end of the world [. . .] the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried” (2). And finally, in the “Inspiration” annex of their “University Creed,” Bob Jones University declares, “The Bible will never change.” What unites these four statements from these four separate fundamentalist institutions is their common use of what I call absolutist language: words and phrases which express belief as incontrovertible fact, which are exclusionary, and which are rooted in a love of authority and supremacy. Words such as “only,” “all,” “supreme, and “never”—words which allow no space for ambiguity or flexibility—are, in the examples above, markers of an absolutist bent. Absolutist language is designed to cut off question and debate. And yet, there is often an unintended irony to such absolutist language. Consider, for example, Bob Jones University’s claims that the Bible “will never change” in light of both the complex history of the formation of the variant biblical canons and the continuing neo-Christian challenge to these canons.

It is not only Protestant fundamentalist institutions which employ such absolutist language. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms biblical authority much as do the above-cited Protestant declarations: “[W]e must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God [. . .] wished to see confided to the



Sacred Scriptures.” And yet, the *Catechism* also declares that “the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’” (31), indicating Catholicism’s quarrel with the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The *Catechism* remains, however, firmly within the absolutist umbrella when it affirms the exclusivity of the ecclesiastic authority which works in conjunction with biblical authority: “The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him” (30). The LDS Church similarly employs absolutist language in its affirmation of its own ecclesiastic leadership. The LDS Church’s highest ranks consist of the church’s president, his counselors, and a quorum of twelve apostles; these men are considered to be modern-day “prophets, seers, and revelators.” In its statement entitled “Prophets,” the LDS Church declares, “We can always trust the living prophets. Their teachings reflect the will of the Lord [. . .]. Our greatest safety lies in strictly following the word of the Lord given through His prophets, particularly the current President of the Church.” Despite their departure from *sola scriptura*, both the Roman Catholic and Mormon hierarchies share the authoritarian bent that is so evident in many of the myriad institutions of Protestant fundamentalism. And although Roman Catholicism and Mormonism are not, to paraphrase the Catholic *Catechism*, “religions of the book” in the way that Protestant fundamentalism is, the absolutist strategy of proof-texting is still employed within both the Roman Catholic and Mormon traditions.

The absolutist current within these three different religious traditions has particularly manifested itself as leaders from each tradition have waged their cultural war against the gay rights movement. And therein lies a curious aspect of biblical absolutism: its most extreme arguments and activities seem often to occur in support of agendas that target groups of people who are, in some way, marked out as different. In order to better understand this relationship

between absolutism and difference, it is instructive to consider a branch of thought which I refer to as difference theory.

## **THE DIFFERENT AND THE DAMNED**

One human being may perceive a second human being as different based on any number of criteria; conversely, that second human being may or may not be aware that he or she has been marked as different. An interesting literary representation of this dynamic of difference can be found in the biblical Song of Songs, a poetic text most likely dating from the third or fourth centuries BCE.<sup>27</sup> One of the Song's speaking voices, belonging to a young woman, declares the following to a group of other women:

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<sup>27</sup> Michael V. Fox notes that the Song's linguistic characteristics tend to confirm such a time frame, but he also reports that the Song has been assigned dates ranging from the mid-tenth century BCE to the third or second centuries BCE. Fox also notes that there is a diversity of opinion as to the Song's structure: "Some scholars believe it is a unified poem constructed on a tight, intricate pattern, while others consider it a loose anthology of originally independent poems from different sources. One view, popular in the nineteenth century, holds that the poem is a drama whose unity resides in a cohesive plot" (1001).

The Song of Solomon holds a unique, and perhaps lamentable, status within the greater Latter-day Saint movement. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, had begun his own "translation" of the Judeo-Christian Bible before his assassination. Smith's "translation" is more of a revelatory revision which radically changes and adds to sections of the Bible. As reviewer Kendal B. Hunter explains, "What Joseph Smith did was to pray over the Bible and receive inspiration about what needed to be corrected and restored back to the Bible." Perhaps Smith's most radical revision was to completely eliminate the Song of Solomon from the canon. The official LDS edition of the Bible (copyright 1984) includes the Song intact, but includes an

Dark I am, yet lovely,  
 O daughters of Jerusalem,  
 dark like the tents of Kedar,  
 like the tent curtains of Solomon.  
 Do not stare at me because I am dark,  
 because I am darkened by the sun. (1:5, 6 [NIV])

The young woman's words indicate her concern over the difference in skin color between herself and the women whom she addresses; moreover, the use of the words "[d]ark [. . .], yet lovely" indicate her concern that the darkness of her skin color may be viewed as incompatible with her addressees' cultural standard of beauty.<sup>28</sup> While asserting that she is indeed lovely, she nevertheless seems to try to excuse her darkness as a natural physiological reaction to exposure to sunlight. The speaker's discourse is further complicated by her choice to address these other women as "daughters of Jerusalem"; the phrase implies that the speaker herself is not a

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ominous footnote: "[T]he JST [i.e. "Joseph Smith Translation"] manuscript states that 'The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings'" (*Holy Bible* [. . .] *Latter-day Saints* 856 n. 1a). A smaller denomination within the larger Latter-day Saint world, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, stayed even closer to Smith's apparent intention in its official 1944 edition of the Bible: the Song is completely eliminated (*Holy Scriptures* [. . .] *Inspired Revision*.)

<sup>28</sup> There is some apparent disagreement as to the translation of the Hebrew statement rendered "Dark am I, yet lovely" in the New International Version. The venerable King James Version reads "I *am* black, but comely," and the Bible in Today's English Version translation reads similarly "I am dark but beautiful"; each choice conveys a meaning that is in general accord with the NIV translation. However, the New Revised Standard Version renders the statement "I am black and beautiful," a translation which removes the notion of cultural conflict between darkness of skin and female beauty. Michael V. Fox, in an annotation to this NRSV rendering, declares his belief that "black *but* beautiful" is in fact a better translation choice.

Jerusalemite<sup>29</sup>, and thus introduces a further layer of difference—regional difference, together with whatever cultural baggage such a difference may imply—into the mix. Thus, in a mere two verses, the biblical author touches on multiple interlocking strands of cultural information, and thereby adds a poignant dimension to the development of this female character.

The Song of Songs is not the first literary work to address the phenomenon of human difference. Indeed, in its broadest sense the topic of difference has been a mainstay throughout the history of literature. Difference has been a particularly rich topic within the national literature of the United States. The conflict between European settlers and indigenous peoples, the relationship between the emergent American nation and the established nations of Europe, the experiences of enslaved Americans—these and other aspects of American culture and history have created a vast and complex tapestry of difference from which writers in all genres have been able to draw inspiration.

The intellectual tools generated in the wake of the Enlightenment era equipped later generations of Americans to make the jump from artistic reflections on difference to sustained critical interrogations of difference as a cultural phenomenon. One of the seminal difference theorists was African-American scholar W. E. B. DuBois. DuBois certainly had many forbears in African-American literature. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Martin Delany and others had written works, in a variety of genres, which vividly depicted the impact that differences in race, color and condition of servitude played in the lives of African-Americans. Moreover, the most potent landmarks in African-American literature offered incisive critiques of the injustices that were so often inflicted in accord with societal conventions of difference and privilege. But

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<sup>29</sup> The editors of *The NIV Study Bible* suggest that the young women might hail from a place called Shunem (1004 n. 6:13).

DuBois took this critique further. In his groundbreaking 1903 study *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois even developed his own specialized terminology with which to conduct his interrogation of difference:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (16, 17)

DuBois revolutionized the theoretical exploration of difference with his new critical vocabulary—terms such as “veil,” “second-sight,” and “double-consciousness.” These terms became tools by which he was able to more incisively examine the reality of difference as it was experienced by Americans of African heritage. Particularly noteworthy is DuBois’ concept of double-consciousness. As described by DuBois, double-consciousness occurs in a social matrix consisting of a privileged, or dominant, group, and one or more groups which are marked as being somehow different from that dominant group, and which are marginalized or stigmatized on the basis of that difference. Although DuBois is writing specifically about racial difference and its impact on African-Americans, his concept of double-consciousness has much wider potential application. He goes on to write, “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (17). The “twoness” he describes could also be that of one who is marginalized on the basis of their gender, their religion, or some other axis of difference.

A contemporary of DuBois who had her eye on just such a broader range of axes of difference was Anna Julia Cooper. An African-American scholar, educator, and activist, Cooper had a number of professional interactions with DuBois over the course of their long respective careers (Washington xl-xli). In her 1892 study *A Voice from the South*, Cooper condemned “[a]ll prejudices, whether of race, sect or sex” (118). Cooper seems to be trying to forge a comprehensive ethic of difference: “For woman’s cause is the cause of the weak; and when all the weak shall have received their due consideration, then woman will have her ‘rights,’ and the Indian will have his rights, and the Negro will have his rights, and the strong will have learned at last to deal justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly” (117). Cooper’s definitions of the “strong” and the “weak” mirror what later generations might refer to as “oppressor” and “oppressed,” or “dominant” and “marginalized.” Predating DuBois’ *Souls* by over a decade, *Voice* seems to anticipate the androcentricity of the later volume. Still, both DuBois and Cooper broke ground in their studies of difference and its ramifications.

The spirit of critique and protest reflected in the work of DuBois, Cooper, and other pioneer theorists of difference continued to make itself manifest in the numerous liberation movements that rocked the United States in the twentieth century. A thorough survey of all these movements, their key thinkers, and their critical texts is beyond the scope of this present study. I will, however, consider the work of two individuals whom I consider indispensable in the study of difference theory: Audre Lorde and Iris Marion Young. Lorde, who died of cancer in 1993, was a poet and activist who taught at Hunter College in New York City. In a 1980 address she defined herself as a “Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple,” adding, “I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong” (*Sister* 114). Young, who died of cancer

in 2006, was a multidisciplinary thinker who served, from 2000 onward, as professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Their respective writings on the phenomenon of difference might thus be seen as representing different vectors of approach, and thereby offering a richer understanding of difference when considered in tandem.

Like W. E. B. DuBois, Lorde was adept at crafting phraseology by which to better examine the phenomenon of human difference. One such term of hers was the “mythical norm”: “In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.” Lorde’s refusal to capitalize the words “america” and “christian” exemplify her own resistance to such “trappings of power.” Lorde observes further that it is no simple matter to chart how the power associated with this “mythical norm” is actually made manifest: “Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we might ourselves be practising [sic]” (*Sister* 116). In other words, an individual who suffers unjust discrimination based on one category of difference—say, racial difference—may concurrently be enabled to exercise an abusive power another individual because that individual differs from her in yet another category, such as immigrant status or socioeconomic class. Lorde’s writings continually return to the theme that difference goes far beyond such simple dichotomies as male/female or black/white; rather, she describes human difference as existing within a complex, multidimensional matrix in which a given individual might find herself both privileged and marginalized along multiple vectors. Despite the injustices and abuses that often stem from the construction of human difference, Lorde sees the potential for

difference to be “a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals” (*Sister* 45).

In her own discussion of “cultural imperialism,” Iris Marion Young touches on themes very similar to those of Lorde: “To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it as the Other” (58, 59). Lorde, in a 1983 interview with Susan Cavin, reflected on her own personal experience of the invisibility described by Young: “I know what it feels to be invisible. I was invisible for many years. It’s crushing” (108). Young’s analysis of cultural imperialism continues thus:

Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. Some groups have exclusive or primary access to [. . .] the means of interpretation and communication in a society. As a consequence, the dominant cultural products of a society, that is, those most widely disseminated, express the experience, values, goals, and achievements of these groups. Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such. (59)

The ideas about difference expressed by both Lorde and Young are particularly relevant to the interpretation of the Bible. The “mythical norm” described by Lorde—white, male, Christian, heterosexual, etc.—has historically provided the lens by which the Judeo-Christian Bible has been interpreted. Thus, while certain groups of people have been rendered “invisible” on the bases of their differences from this norm, so too have their interpretations of the Bible been suppressed or erased.



African-American biblical interpretation, feminist biblical interpretation, gay-friendly biblical interpretation—these and other approaches to the Bible have often been in conflict with absolutist readings of the same text. This conflict stems in part from the absolutist concept of biblical authority. To the absolutist of the Protestant fundamentalist wing, the Bible is supreme in its authority and inerrant in its content; to the absolutist of the Roman Catholic and Mormon wings, the Bible is part of a configuration—consisting of scripture and ecclesiastic hierarchy—which is similarly seen as supreme and inerrant. The absolutist’s font of authority, by virtue of its overwhelming supremacy, is seen as transcending any cultural factors. In other words, when—for example—the Southern Baptist Convention declares the Bible to be “the supreme standard by which all human conduct [. . .] should be tried,” the implication is that the Bible is equally relevant for people without regard to their race, national origin, gender, socioeconomic class, or other consideration. Moreover, for the absolutist there is no ambiguity in biblical interpretation. There is not a Native American perspective on the conquest of Canaan or a lesbian reading of the Book of Ruth—rather, there is a single correct reading of each passage which is relevant to all readers. In practice, however, this one “correct” reading of the absolutist tends to favor the “mythical norm” described by Lorde—in other words, this “correct” reading functions as a manifestation of cultural imperialism.

Absolutist hermeneutics thus attempts to invalidate the readings of subaltern groups whose members try to reclaim the Bible for themselves; this conflict between absolutist and subaltern, or liberationist, hermeneutics will be explored further in the second and third chapters of this study. And yet, there is something profoundly problematic about the absolutist claim of universality in hermeneutics. As Iris Marion Young writes, “The ideal of impartiality expresses in fact an impossibility, a fiction. No one can adopt a point of view that is completely

impersonal and dispassionate, completely separated from any particular context and commitments” (103). Young notes further that there are risks for those who try to expose this stance of impartiality for the fiction it is: “If oppressed groups challenge the alleged neutrality of prevailing assumptions and policies and express their own experience and perspectives, their claims are heard as those of biased, selfish special interests that deviate from the impartial general interests” (116). Indeed, the biblical interpretation of abolitionist and pro-gay readers have so been stigmatized by those representing entrenched interests.

Because practitioners of absolutist hermeneutics cling to the fiction of impartiality, they effectively discount the complex matrix of human difference and privilege as a factor in their own encounter with the Bible. And yet, I contend that this matrix does in fact have a significant impact in absolutist hermeneutics. Those Christians who cited the Bible in their attacks on the abolitionist movement, for example, both drew from and contributed to a social system of white supremacy, despite any claims of interpretive objectivity on their part. The work of these anti-abolitionist Christians has been mirrored again and again by those who have allied the Bible to other programs of marginalization.

### **INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES AND THE “FOUR BIBLES”**

The cultural imperialism and false claims of neutrality against which Iris Marion Young warns us might be better understood in light of the work of Stanley Fish. In his groundbreaking 1980 study *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish develops the concept of the “interpretive community”:

Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is assumed, the other way around. (14)

Consider Fish's claims in the context of biblical interpretation. One might say that Bible readers with radically different views are not reading the same Bible differently, but rather are reading different "Bibles," each one produced by a different interpretive community. Fish notes further, "An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral" (14). In a sense, any particular faith community functions as one of Fish's interpretive communities. This helps to explain why disparate Christian and neo-Christian sects can share the same New Testament canon, and even use some of the same translations, and yet come away from the scriptures with such radically differing doctrines and practices. Some sects allow female clergy and some do not; some practice baptism by immersion and some by sprinkling; some observe their Sabbath on a Saturday and some on a Sunday; and so forth. And yet, each sect can point to New Testament justification for its particular take on such a contended practice. The individual sect member reads such key texts in the light of the norms of his religious interpretive community.

Of course, being a member of a given sect with a given body of doctrines and practices does not make one an absolutist. A religious interpretive community is not necessarily absolutist in nature. Absolutism, to reiterate my earlier definition, is marked by extreme authoritarianism, exclusivity and rigidity. A non-absolutist might, for example, belong to a denomination that

only allows males to be ordained as clergy; she might even believe this to be the most appropriate Christian position in light of biblical teachings. An absolutist, however, goes far beyond such a position; she not only believes in male-only ordination, but summarily dismisses any attempted biblical interpretations that support female ordination. The absolutist holds fast to a “The Bible says so—the discussion is over” mindset. There is no room for ambiguity; no space to challenge established authority. The interpretive community of the absolutist functions as a closed echo chamber which excludes alternative voices.

It is a common claim of biblical absolutists, and of the interpretive communities to which they belong, that they believe, defend, and obey the Bible completely. They also claim to read much of the text literally; the commands of the text—the ubiquitous “Thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” of the popular imagination—are read as being in force today. As noted above, the underlying assumption of this literalist approach is that the wisdom of the Bible is transcultural—not bound by the particular worlds of its varied authors.

In actuality, however, the absolutist readers of the Bible engage with the text which is more complex and more arbitrary than they seem to recognize, or seem willing to admit. Critics of biblical absolutists invariably point out that even the most rigid adherents of this belief system invariably ignore certain commands of their “infallible” Bible. Whether they are the dietary regulations of Leviticus or Pauline injunctions regarding women’s grooming, these biblical verses seem to fall by the wayside. Critics of biblical absolutism are correct in discerning a discrepancy in the alleged “literalist” approach to the Bible. However, a closer look at the mechanics of absolutist hermeneutics illuminates the source of this discrepancy. This mechanics of interpretation might be understood through what I call the “four Bible” model.

As noted earlier, the very idea of a “standard” Bible is problematic due to the multiplicity of variant scriptural canons within the greater Judeo-Christian world. But for argument’s sake, I will use the term “Bible” in reference to those core books which are common to virtually every such canon—the five Books of Moses, the four Gospels, and so forth. Absolutist Christians often refer to this “Bible” as the source of their doctrine, as the guide for their practice. However, absolutist Christians, in reality, tend to construct their own unique, issue-driven Bibles. For the sake of clarity, I will designate the “standard” Judeo-Christian Bible as Bible<sub>T1</sub>—the subscript meaning “text 1.” Bible<sub>T1</sub> is actually a source text from which absolutists construct their true authoritative source, Bible<sub>T4</sub>. To clarify further, I define the “four Bibles” of absolutist Christianity as follows:

**Bible<sub>T1</sub>:** The standard Judeo-Christian Bible.

**Bible<sub>T2</sub>:** This second “text” is actually a synthesis of various oral and received “texts” on a give subject. For anti-abolitionist Christians, Bible<sub>T2</sub> primarily consisted of the received traditions of white supremacy, traditions embodied in countless works of popular literature, ethnographic and anthropological writings, sermons, political speeches, and other sources. For anti-gay Christians, Bible<sub>T2</sub> consists of the traditions of heterosexism. Because absolutist Christians are loathe to admit that they hold any other source of knowledge—apart from recognized leaders in some sects’ ecclesiastic hierarchies—as equal in authority to Bible<sub>T1</sub>, Bible<sub>T2</sub> generally functions as a sort of “invisible” text.

**Bible<sub>T3</sub>:** This text consists of passages lifted out of Bible<sub>T1</sub>. In other words, Bible<sub>T3</sub> is of the mass of “proof texts” used to support a particular position. Plucked out of various sections of the Bible, they are essentially grouped together under the umbrella of a particular argument.

**Bible<sub>T4</sub>:** This fourth text represents the merging of Bible<sub>T3</sub>, the array of proof-texts, with Bible<sub>T2</sub>, that synthesized mass of received cultural knowledge. Bible<sub>T4</sub> changes in form from age to age, and from cause to cause; it is the true “sacred text” of a given party of absolutist Christians.

Thus, when I write of “the slavemaster’s Bible” and “the anti-gay Bible” in the following chapter, I am actually referring to two different Bibles<sub>T4</sub>. Although the absolutist Christian reverently carries Bible<sub>T1</sub> under his arm when he goes to church services and cracks it open when he engages in “spiritual warfare” with his enemies, the presence of this physical Bible is, in actuality, an illusion. Bible<sub>T1</sub> is a massive, complex, often cryptic, and often contradictory collection of documents. The absolutist Christian may carry a physical Bible<sub>T1</sub> in her hand, but it is Bible<sub>T4</sub> to which she turns for rhetorical ammunition. One might say that Bible<sub>T4</sub> is the text which is “written” by an absolutist interpretive community.

The construction Bibles<sub>T2-4</sub> has analogous precedents in Christian history. Consider, for example, the work of Martin Luther at the dawn of the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s dismissal of the New Testament letter of James as an “epistle of straw” indicates that Luther did not regard all portions of the Bible as having equal weight. Scholars have noted that Luther, there was apparently a “Bible within the Bible” (J. Benton White 26), or “canon within the

canon” (Burgess 53, 54)—his Bible<sub>T3</sub>. For Luther, James was not part of his Bible<sub>T3</sub>, and consequently not a part of his Bible<sub>T4</sub>.

Although they have their Bible<sub>T4</sub>, absolutist Christians still must deal with the remainder of Bible<sub>T1</sub>. Significantly, Bible<sub>T1</sub> contains texts which are not part of either Bible<sub>T3</sub> or Bible<sub>T4</sub>—texts of straw, to use an analogy from Luther’s experience. Anti-gay interpreters of the Bible, for example, are frequently called upon to explain biblical texts which celebrate same-gender love or demonstrate acceptance of “sexual minorities” such as eunuchs. Biblical absolutists, when confronted with such texts of straw, simply use their true Bible—that is, their Bible<sub>T4</sub>—as what John Burgess calls “the lens of interpretation” (54) through which they can control any errant passages.

Many critics have expressed concern over the approach to the Bible taken by various camps within the world of biblical absolutism. Daniel Patte, for example, observes that “evangelical fundamentalists read into the text their religious preunderstandings, making it say what they want to hear, and hide their betrayal of the text by appealing to the authority of the text as sacred scripture” (80). Similarly, John Burgess expresses concern over the extensive editorial apparatus found in many contemporary editions of the Bible—apparatus which, one could say, function as a tangible Bible<sub>T2</sub>. Although such apparatus often claim “to make the Bible accurate and easy to understand,” Burgess offers the following caution:

But one wonders whether these benefits come at the cost of flattening Scripture and transforming it into a kind of literature that more closely resembles the newspaper than great poetry. The language of Scripture becomes increasingly

univocal. It loses nuance and a capacity to point beyond itself, or to mediate an encounter with the transcendent. (36)

This attempt to impose an artificial univocality on the Bible is the hallmark of all absolutist hermeneutics. The absolutist cannot bear to hear discordant voices—voices which challenge her culturally instilled desires and prejudices. She desperately needs a source of absolute truth which is authoritative, complete, and univocal.

Biblical absolutism is, however, only one half of the equation of what I call “oppressor hermeneutics.” The other component of oppressor hermeneutics is an adherence to systems of marginalization and domination based on human difference—the systems critiqued by Anna Julia Cooper, Iris Marion Young, and others. For the practitioner of a given form of oppressor hermeneutics, Bible<sub>T2</sub> is a “text” created from the ample fabric of a particular marginalizing thought system.

Although the adherents of oppressor hermeneutics invariably claim that their own reading of the Judeo-Christian Bible is a “neutral” reading which allows the text to speak on its own terms, such readers are actually ensnared in their own webs of culturally conditioned assumptions and traditions. As Iris Marion Young notes, the “ideal of impartiality” is, in fact, a self-deceiving myth which masks an active process of oppression. Oppressor hermeneutics are, therefore, a complex synthesis of authority fetishization, adherence to systems of privilege and domination, and subtle textual mechanics. In the amply documented wars of absolutist Christians against the nineteenth century abolitionist movement and the twentieth century gay rights movement, oppressor hermeneutics play central roles.



### 3.0 CHAPTER TWO: THE SLAVEMASTER’S BIBLE AND THE ANTI-GAY BIBLE

The rhetorics of the contemporary anti-gay Religious Right and of the anti-abolitionist Christians of the nineteenth century mirror each other in two primary ways. First, both the “Slavemaster’s Bible” (that is, their Bible<sub>T4</sub>) and the “Anti-Gay Bible” generally follow a three movement rhythm: historical precedent from the Patriarchal<sup>30</sup> era (i.e. passages from the book of Genesis), codification under Mosaic law (Exodus through Deuteronomy), and apostolic reaffirmation in the Christian dispensation (Romans through Jude). As an auxiliary to this three part structure, the much more extensive Slavemaster’s Bible also employs a wealth of passages from other parts of the Bible<sub>T1</sub>. Aside from that, the structure of the two Bibles<sub>T4</sub> remains essentially identical.

The second way in which the opponents of abolitionism and gay rights mirror each other is through what I call the “background rhetoric,” or “secondary rhetoric” of their respective biblical hermeneutic systems. Each group’s foreground rhetoric, or primary rhetoric, is represented by its selection and framing of a mass of biblical passages; in other words, by its

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<sup>30</sup> The term *patriarchs* has been used in most scholarship in reference to the ancestors of Israel, particularly those appearing in Genesis 12-50 (Metzger and Coogan 576). I use the terms *patriarchs* and *patriarchal* in a somewhat broader sense, so as to embrace major figures from the entirety of Genesis; in doing so I do not mean to slight the matriarchs who also play key roles in these narratives.

explicit and specific use of biblical proof texts. Each group's background rhetoric, on the other hand, includes its rhetoric about the act of biblical interpretation itself; it is a self-conscious reflection upon the practice of reading. This background rhetoric also encompasses each group's moral judgments about itself and about groups which its members see as constituting hostile or dangerous "others." These two rhetorics are intimately connected and are often expressed simultaneously in the same utterance.

Thus, for each of these two groups, the foreground/primary and background/secondary rhetorics work together to form an apparently seamless whole: an absolutist construct that seeks to utterly condemn and contain a deviant and menacing socio-spiritual cancer.

### **ABSOLUTIST BACKGROUND RHETORIC**

The background rhetoric of both anti-abolitionist and anti-gay users of the Bible encompasses seven fundamental beliefs:

- (1) The Judeo-Christian Bible is an absolute and unquestionable authority.
- (2) The entire Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, is clear and consistent on the topic of slavery (or homosexuality).
- (3) Abolitionism (or gay-positive theology) is essentially anti-Bible and anti-God.
- (4) Abolitionism (or gay-positive theology) may be seen as a false religion or heresy, comparable to other cults or organized false belief systems.
- (5) People of African ancestry (or people who embrace a homosexual lifestyle) are depraved, dangerous, and need to be controlled with biblically-based principles and social mechanisms.

- (6) The abolitionist movement (or gay rights movement) uses corrupt hermeneutics with which to arrive at its conclusions.
- (7) The abolitionist movement (or the gay rights movement) constitutes a grave and gathering threat to the people, culture, and religious institutions of the United States.

Although not every anti-abolitionist or anti-gay spokesperson necessarily believes in or espouses every single one of these seven statements, these statements may still be seen running throughout these respective literatures.

The first of the seven statements: “The Judeo-Christian Bible is an absolute and unquestionable authority”—is the most foundational. Without this assertion, all appeals to the Bible are hollow. Thus it is in expressing this belief that writers from both camps use some of their most confident language. For example, the anonymous “citizen of Georgia,” in his *Remarks upon Slavery*, writes, “It will, on all hands, no doubt be agreed, that the Bible alone contains the revealed will of God—that we are to look in that Holy Book for the moral law” (3). Similarly, Alexander McCaine declares, “It is not popular opinion—it is not the law of the land—but it is the Word of God that I receive as the standard of morals. It is this, and this alone, which determines what is a *great moral evil* and what is not” (19). McCaine’s notion that the Bible supersedes even civil law is also championed by George Armstrong:

The Church is the *School of Christ*; and the Bible is the authoritative textbook appointed to be taught in that school [. . .].

The Church is the *Kingdom of Christ*; and the Bible is the one only law-book of that kingdom [. . .].

Let us, then, adopt this course in the case before us. The Bible, the authoritative text-book in the School of Christ, the code of laws in the Kingdom of Christ, teaches that slave-holding is not a *sin*. To the Bible, then, let us go, and not to the writings of Aristotle, or to the civil law of Rome, or to the laws of South Carolina, for a definition of slavery. (104)

Armstrong's two metaphors—the Bible as “text-book” and the Bible as “law-book”—are particularly potent.

As the gay rights movement began to gain ground in the late twentieth century, anti-gay activists began to echo some of these anti-abolitionist statements about biblical authority. Anita Bryant, the entertainer who became an anti-gay icon in the 1970s<sup>31</sup>, laid down the gauntlet with statements like the following:

Christians have values which are worth sharing. Those values embrace the plain statements of the Bible and dictate my responses to what happens to me and to those I love. The Bible is God's Word of guidance for the good of man. When situations which affect our lives run counter to what the Bible says, then we, as Christians, are obligated—if we are to remain true God and what we believe—to stand for what is right. (“Standing” 11)

Bryant's husband, Bob Green, echoed her stance: “When you ignore the moral absolutes of the Bible, you have no guidelines left” (“Contrary Winds” 91). Although Bryant and Green

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<sup>31</sup> Manuel Roig-Franzia, in a 2002 *Washington Post* article on Bryant's legacy, noted that she was “a mythic and reviled figure” for contemporary gay rights activists in the Florida's Dade County, where she had waged battle against gay rights in the 1970s. According to Lorri Jean, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Bryant not only impacted Florida, but “wreaked havoc all over the country” (qtd. in Roig-Franzia).

eventually faded from the anti-gay scene, their concept of biblical authority remains a key talking point for anti-gay activists.

The concept of the Bible as an absolute and infallible authority leads to the second key assertion of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay activists: that the Bible speaks with clarity and internal consistency on their respective issues. Regarding the first of these two qualities Howell Cobb writes,

Our adoration is demanded, as we see the wonderful Book of God adapting its lessons of instruction to each passing event, as if they had been prepared exclusively for that [. . .]. The Bible meets all with a distinctness and a particularity neither to be mistaken nor misunderstood—commanding what ought to be done, and forbidding what ought not to be done, in each particular case [. . .]. (5)

Complementing Cobb's claim of biblical clarity, Josiah Priest speaks to this claim of biblical consistency: "CONSISTENCY among the writers of the Holy Scriptures, who were inspired by the immutable God on the *same* subjects, forbids the belief that they should clash (321)." The anonymous Citizen of Georgia emphasizes the unity of the Jewish and Christian testaments on the issue of slavery: "If we pass from the Old to the New Testament, we shall find a perfect coincident on this subject in the two dispensations" (11). And Alexander McCaine asserts that the Bible "is one and indivisible—is uniform and perpetual" (19).

Anti-gay activists see a similar clarity and consistency in the Bible with regard to homosexuality. In the words of Greg Bahnsen, "God's verdict on homosexuality is inescapably clear" (36). Erwin Lutzer uses figurative language to make the same point, claiming that "the Bible does not speak about homosexuality with a muffled voice" (35). In claiming the clarity of

the Bible's anti-gay message, George Grant and Mark Horne also claim a consistency across testaments for that message: "The whole testimony of Scripture, from the beginning of the Old Testament record, through the Gospels, and on to the end of the New Testament, is absolutely clear: homosexuality is sin whether committed in thought, word, or deed" (197). Also stressing the unity of both Testaments on this subject is Marlin Maddoux: "The simple fact is that the Bible condemns homosexuality for any reason. Passages against homosexuality abound in both the Old and New Testaments" (34).

The first two core claims of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay background rhetoric focus on the nature of the Bible. With the third core claim these movements focus on their ideological opponents. If the first of the two statements are true, then it would follow logically that the movements for abolishing slavery and establishing gay rights stand in opposition to the Bible, and thus in opposition to divine will. N.L. Rice, in his debate against abolitionist J. Blanchard, conveys this idea in his condemnation of a trio of other abolitionists: "I see where Garrison, and Leavitt, and Smith have got to, by striking out new paths, and turning from the good old ways of Bible truth. No longer guided by the word of God, they are boldly denouncing the church of Jesus Christ, and with vain efforts laboring for its overthrow" (Blanchard and Rice 251). Likewise does George Armstrong claim that "blasphemy is one of the characteristic features of" anti-slavery literature (83). Other anti-abolitionists expressed the same ideas in more colorful language; in his debate against Abram Pryne, for example, W.G. Brownlow declares that the abolitionist deems the Bible "only fit for a foot-ball" (Brownlow and Pryne 217).

The idea that their enemies are anti-Bible and anti-God has also been embraced by anti-gay activists of the contemporary Christian Right. Tim LaHaye<sup>32</sup> puts it this way: “Liberal churchmen not only betray their ignorance and unbelief in the Word of God by their excessively lenient position on homosexuality, but they also reveal that they do not understand its true source” (145). Similarly does Greg Bahnsen believe that pro-gay individuals have an “antipathy to biblical revelation”; he claims that “many cases arguing for tolerance of homosexuality are based on doctrinal premises that deviate from biblical teaching. Those who put forth such arguments cannot be seen as attempting to worship the living and true God as He directs and desires” (16).

A number of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay activists have gone beyond simply painting their opponents as anti-Bible and anti-God. Instead, they have lumped these movements in with other “cults” and “false” belief systems, thus expressing the fourth core idea of absolutist background hermeneutics. The life of the abolitionist movement ironically coincided with the emergence of a number of new religious movements in the United States—among them Mormonism—which would be harshly attacked as heretical by advocates of “traditional” American Christianity. For some anti-abolitionist advocates this phenomenon provided a context in which to understand and from which to attack abolitionism:

But in religious truth or reverence for the Bible, the age in which we live is prolific in daring and impious innovation. We have seen professedly Christian communities divided and subdivided on every side. We have seen the rise and spread of Universalism, Millerism, Pantheism, Mormonism, and Spiritualism

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<sup>32</sup> All Tim LaHaye quotes in this present work are from his 1978 book *The Unhappy Gays*. For more on LaHaye see notes 88, 89 and 92 below.

[. . .]. And we have heard the increasing clamor against the Bible, sometimes from the devotees of geological speculation, sometimes from the bold deniers of miracles and prophecy, and, not least upon the list, from the loud-tongued apostles of anti-slavery. (Hopkins 48)

W. G. Brownlow also placed abolitionism within such a context; he railed against “Spiritualism, Abolitionism, Fanny-Wrightism, Fourierism, Mormonism, Free-Loveism, and the hundred and one *isms* so spontaneously produced by the soil on New England” (Brownlow and Pryne 168). Brownlow also tried to connect abolitionism to the heretical sects of centuries past: “The ‘illustrious predecessors’ of our New England Abolitionists, were the *Gnostics* and *Manicheans* of Asia Minor. These *fanatics* [. . .] decried the lawfulness of slavery; they denounced slaveholders as violating the laws of God and man, just as our Abolitionists do” (Brownlow and Pryne 209). By using such arguments, Hopkins and Brownlow sought to position themselves not merely as defenders of slavery, but as defenders of “true” Christianity in a broader context.<sup>33</sup>

Echoing the strategy of Hopkins and Brownlow are anti-gay writers like Jeffrey Satinover. Framing his argument within the context of an epic struggle between paganism and Christian monotheism, Satinover attributes modern tolerance of homosexuality to a resurgence of paganism. As did W.G Brownlow, Satinover specifically references Gnosticism and Manichaeism as he mounts his rhetorical attack:

We can trace a historical line that connects the pagan religions of the ancient Near East (including Canaan) to pre- and early Christian Gnosticism, to the

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<sup>33</sup> Brownlow also lumps abolitionists together with “Free Soilers [. . .], Trance Mediums, Bible Repudiators, and representatives of every other crazy *ism* known to the annals of bedlam” (Brownlow and Pryne 160).



Manichaeism of the late Roman and Aryan Empires, to certain schools of medieval Kabbalah and Alchemy, through the transforming matrix of Renaissance Neoplatonism with its combined emphases on magic, humanism, and science. From there, it is but a short step to the modern reduction of spirit to psyche that has allowed the present pagan resurgence. (235)

Also linking homosexuality to modern paganism is Harold Lindsell. Warning against the seduction of young boys into homosexuality by adult men, Lindsell writes, “Homosexuals seek to condition society to make it believe that unnatural sex between male adults and boys is not wrong. And given the pagan perspectives with which they function and their detachment from the Word of God [. . .], they have no sense of guilt or even of impropriety” (160).

Paganism is not the only *ism* to which anti-gay activists try to link the gay rights movement. As did the anti-abolitionists of the nineteenth century, anti-gay activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have sought to tie their opponents to the most feared and hated *isms* of the day. For Bob Green, that *ism* is “a secular religion called *humanism*—the view that man, rather than God, is the center of the universe.” Green asserts that humanism “has taken over public education from coast to coast and is using school textbooks and sex-education classes to push homosexuality as being perfectly normal and proper” (“No Turning Back” 24). Tim LaHaye cites Communism as and Marxism as possible parent *isms* for gay liberation; referring to the Mattachine Society, a pioneer gay rights group, LaHaye writes, “I have read that the founder was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party for eighteen years and a popular teacher of Marxist principles” (170). Televangelist Pat Robertson claims yet another *ism*

as kin to homosexuality: “Many of the people involved with Adolf Hitler were Satanists, and some of them were homosexuals. The two things seem to go together.”<sup>34</sup>

For many anti-abolitionists, the notion of abolitionists as being adherents of a false religion coincided with the fifth pillar of their background hermeneutics—the belief that people of African descent were an uncivilized, inferior breed of humans who desperately needed the guidance of the “true” religion to uplift them from their degraded state. Howell Cobb expressed this latter line of thought in the form of two propositions:

1. *African slavery is a punishment, inflicted upon the enslaved, for their wickedness [ . . . ].*

2. *Slavery, as it exists in the United States, is the Providentially-arranged means whereby Africa is to be lifted from her deep degradation, to a state of civil and religious liberty. (3)*

Cobb’s second proposition is particularly resonant. By positing slavery as the means to a benevolent end, he attempts to seize the moral high ground over his abolitionist foes. Later in his *Scriptural Examination of the Institution of Slavery*, Cobb follows up on his second proposition, declaring that one of the objectives of the American slave system is “the redemption of Africa from all her woes, and making her an independent Christian nation” (92). With this claim Cobb ties his argument into the “Great Commission” attributed to Jesus: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). Cobb thus attempts to place his claims of African depravity within a larger Christian theological context.

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<sup>34</sup> According to Robert Boston, this statement was made on Robertson’s television program *The 700 Club* on March 7, 1990 (173).

The “African depravity” argument put forth by men like Cobb follows logically from the assumption that native Africans lack both a legitimate culture and a legitimate religious tradition. Consider Samuel How’s dismissal of indigenous African spirituality: “Their religion sheds no purifying or elevating influences over their minds, but cherishes and strengthens every impure and debased passion” (77). For many of slavery’s defenders, the “debased passion[s]” cited by How stemmed from inherent racial qualities. Samuel Cartwright, for example, refers to black Africans as “the prognathous species of mankind [. . .], the lowest of the human species,” whose “besetting sins” include polygamy and the abuse of “intoxicating drinks” (715).

For believers in Cartwright’s racial stereotype, slavery became the vehicle by which the civilizing influence of Christianity could be best delivered to people of African descent. Indeed, E.N. Elliott boasted of slaveholding southern Christendom’s effectiveness in achieving this portion of the “Great Commission”: “They [i.e. white southern slaveholders] had received from Africa a few hundred thousand pagan savages, and had developed them into millions of civilized Christians, happy in themselves, and useful to the world” (viii-ix). J.H. Hammond also celebrated the uplifting of Africans in America via the Christianizing mission of slavery:

As regards their [African-Americans’] religious condition, it is well known that a majority of the communicants of the Methodist and Baptist churches of the South are coloured. Almost everywhere they have precisely the same opportunities of attending worship that the whites have, and, besides special occasions for themselves exclusively, which they prefer [. . .]. In some parts, also, Sunday schools for blacks are established, and Bible classes are orally instructed by discreet and pious persons. (133-34)

The message of the anti-abolitionist movement was that without such opportunities for religious education—opportunities ultimately made possible via the vehicle of American slavery—people of African descent would have remained mired in the idolatry, filth, and perversion of pagan Africa.

As loathsome as were pre-enslaved, pre-Christianized Africans to the anti-abolitionists, so too are contemporary lesbians and gay men to the twentieth- and twenty-first century Religious Right. The Traditional Values Coalition, a Washington, DC-based Christian Right organization, has been one of the entities most vocal in disseminating the worst stereotypes of gay degradation. In one report, *Statistics on the Homosexual Lifestyle*, the Coalition paints a portrait of gay life as awash in sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, and domestic violence—a list of vices reminiscent of Samuel Cartwright’s assessment of native Africans. The report concludes, “Homosexuals are clearly deeply dysfunctional and self-destructive.” Marlin Maddoux offers a similar view, reducing the totality of gay lives to three *D*’s: “As men and women are lured into choosing the gay lifestyle, they usually drift from deceived to diseased to dead” (35).

Interestingly, both the anti-abolitionists and anti-gay activists recommended conversion to Christianity as the only cure for the degradation which the diagnosed in their respective dangerous “other.” Of course, anti-abolitionist theology held that a true conversion to Christianity on the part of an African-American slave must lead that slave to a path of obedience and humility. Consider the opinion of W.G. Brownlow, for whom a properly “*Christianized*” African is also “civilized” and “tamed” (Brownlow and Pryne 101). E.N. Elliot notes that black slaves are being instructed “in the principles of our common Christianity,” and he expresses high hopes for them: “We understand the nature of the negro race; and in the relation in which the

providence of God has placed them to us, they are happy and useful members of society, and are fast rising in the scale of intelligence and civilization, and the time may come when they will be capable of freedom and self-government” (ix). Notice that Elliot states that the time of liberation “may come”—it is no guarantee. However, anti-abolitionist authors remind their audience that, even if held in bondage for their entire earthly lives, these black slaves, in embracing Christianity, are “brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Cobb 8). In other words, they gain a spiritual freedom which culminates in “the glorious hope of a blessed immortality” (Southern Clergyman 9). In other words, a human lifetime of enslavement is insignificant in comparison with an eternity enjoying the glories of heaven with other sanctified Christians.

For the contemporary homosexual, anti-gay author Roger J. Magnuson offers both a diagnosis and a prescription which mirror the doctrines of the previous century’s anti-abolitionists:

The sodomite is trapped in a lust that is destroying him by inches and yards. To tell him he cannot help himself, to tell him to rejoice in his fatal disease, is to consign him forever to unhappiness. Much better the simple message of Christian grace. You are a responsible moral being who has sinned grievously against God. God loves you but hates your life-style. You are headed for judgment, but there is a way out. (122-23)

Just as the enslaved African-American must stifle any tendencies towards disobedience, surrender any plans to escape and flee north, so too must the modern homosexual give up any dreams of a life spent in companionship and sexual love with a person of his same gender. But

as did the anti-abolitionist, so too does the contemporary anti-gay activist hold out the promise of ultimate freedom and joy in salvation through Jesus Christ.

In their drive to so convince and contain a deviant and dangerous other, practitioners of absolutist hermeneutics find themselves at odds with liberationist hermeneutics. Hence the sixth pillar of absolutist background hermeneutics: its assertion that liberationist hermeneutics are flawed and destructive. The anti-abolitionists who took up this argument often used it as an opportunity to unleash some of their most blistering invective. Albert Bledsoe, for example, accuses the “spirit of abolitionism” of trying to “wrest the pure word of God to its antichristian purpose” (378). In like spirit, the anonymous “Southern Clergyman” charges abolitionists with “absurd sophism,” “sophistical misrepresentation,” and “a mad disregard for the Bible” (8). Other anti-abolitionist authors also take up this battle cry, condemning abolitionist readings of the Bible as consisting of “false glosses” (Armstrong iii-iv), “cunningly-devised fables” (Bledsoe 343), and “blasphemous perversions of the word of God” (Brownlow and Pryne 78). Amidst all of these verbal missiles, anti-abolitionist authors maintained that theirs was the pure and correct approach to the Bible. For George Junkin, this true approach involved looking for “the plain, obvious, simple meaning of his [i.e. God’s] Word” (15).

Contemporary anti-gay activists excoriate gay-positive hermeneutics with the same vigor that anti-abolitionists brought to their battles over the Bible. F. LaGard Smith, for example, accuses pro-gay theologian Robert Smith of “doing scholastic flip-flops” (135); similarly, George Grant and Mark Horne declare that a team of pro-gay Christian authors handle their subject “with the grace of a three-legged elephant” (172). For Francis Schaffer, any Christian “accommodation” on the subject of homosexuality represents “a direct and deliberate bending of the Bible” (137). And R. Albert Mohler opines that a gay-positive approach to the Bible

“requires feats of exotic biblical interpretation worthy of the most agile circus contortionist” (6). Ultimately, from these absolutist perspectives, a gay-friendly approach to the Bible means an “effort to get around the plain teaching” of the Bible (F. LaGard Smith 127). This emphasis on the “plain” meaning of the Bible echoes the words of anti-abolitionists like George Junkin.

And what, for both anti-abolitionists and anti-gay activists, is ultimately at stake in this battle over biblical interpretation? This question leads to the seventh pillar of their respective background rhetorics: the assertion that the insurgent movement at hand represents not just an attack on the Bible, but rather a broader threat to the people, culture, and religious institutions of the United States. In developing this idea, anti-abolitionist writers spun some of their most apocalyptic rhetoric. Joseph Stiles’ attack on abolitionist hermeneutics, for example, led into the following broader warning:

Now if language explicitly calling up and enforcing the very ideas that have always dwelt in the mind, and are carried out in the every day customs of surrounding society, is to be interpreted to eradicate those ideas and establish an opposite state of society, then I affirm, we have not only no Bible, but *no language* on earth. (26-27)

George Armstrong raised the same red flag as Stiles, claiming that “the principles and methods of interpretation” employed by the abolitionist movement “destroy all certainty in human language” (145). J.K. Paulding, another anti-abolitionist writer, delivers a “slippery slope” warning in his condemnation of the abolitionist movement and of its hermeneutics in particular:

Their whole proceedings are in direct hostility to all freedom of persons and property; for if they can find one text of Scripture which renders it imperative on the master “instantly”—as they maintain in their great manifesto—to manumit his

slaves, there is no knowing but that in good time they may detect in the dream of Isaiah, or the Song of Solomon, another, which commands us to restore to the Indians the lands which they once held within the limits of the United States. (304-05)

Like Paulding, John Richter Jones warned of the dangers that could result if the abolitionist movement succeeded. Jones claimed that in violating the rights of slaveholders, abolitionists embraced “the same principle exactly which influenced the inquisition; and, which, beginning on the hope to save men’s souls, ended with the burning of their bodies at the stake.” He continues: “In like manner the effort to coerce slaveholders [. . .] may end in bringing the horrors of St. Domingo on Virginia and Carolina” (23). Not content with merely using the Spanish Inquisition as a bogeyman, Jones also warns that abolitionism “is a step towards anarchy” (32-33). Samuel How also raises the specter of anarchy in his commendation of the abolitionist movement (19). Whether warning of linguistic destabilization, a Native American land rights movement, an American revival of the Spanish Inquisition, or all out “anarchy,” anti-abolitionist spokespersons raised nightmare scenarios worthy of the seer of Patmos.

Nightmare scenarios also spice the screeds of the most militant anti-gay activists. Janet Parshall claims that “homosexual activism” is a “juggernaut” of great destructive power. Robert A.J. Gagnon sounds a similar alarm, predicting that “attempts to impose the acceptance of homosexual practice on mainline churches will have a devastating multilayered effect” (88). Writing at the dawn of the Clinton presidency in the early 1990s, D. James Kennedy warned of the militant gay “juggernaut” with regard to a very specific piece of legislation:

We now have, for the first time in the history of America, a new administration with a new platform and with new promises that it intends to codify into law a



clear violation of the commandments of God. This is an effort to destroy the foundation upon which this nation was built. We see that there has been the promise to pass a national gay and lesbian civil rights act [. . .]. That, of course, is a violation of the seventh commandment which forbids all manner of sexual immorality. (83)

For good measure, Kennedy immediately follows this statement by quoting Leviticus 18:22, a favorite anti-gay prooftext. Two decades later, the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property raised a similar cry with regard to *Lawrence v. Texas*, the landmark Supreme Court case which invalidated state-level anti-sodomy laws. Comparing *Lawrence* to an earlier case also loathed by the Christian Right, the organization declares, “Unlike *Roe* [*v. Wade*], *Lawrence* will not result directly in the killing of unborn Americans. However, it created the legal and psychological framework for the total destruction of what is left of the country’s moral structures” (1). Of course, the phrase “moral structures” represents an intangible concept; many anti-gay spokespersons prefer to paint the alleged homosexual threat in more concrete terms. Kerusso Ministries, for example, mailed out to prospective supporters a pledge card with an image of a child caught in the crosshairs of a weapon sighting device; the image bears the caption “Target: Children.” The message on the pledge card asks recipients to “help counter the growing homosexual movement.” The idea that homosexuals are after the nation’s children is a recurrent theme in anti-gay propaganda, and an example of the apocalyptic tone often employed in such propaganda.

And what, according Christian Right activists, would be the result if the homosexual movement were to succeed? Erwin Lutzer warns that once gay activists begin to secure societal rights and privileges, “our society will be on the road to a dark and unthinkable future” (30). He

elaborates further: “The radical homosexual movement that preaches tolerance will not itself tolerate alternate opinions. Everyone must move in lockstep with their agenda—or pay a price” (107). Alan Sears also takes up this theme, claiming that “homosexuals want to deny *your right* as a Christian to oppose their outrageous legal agenda.” In another diatribe—this one written with co-author Craig Osten—Sears elaborates on this vision of a fascist America brought about by gay activism:

We are [. . .] at the eleventh hour with regard to homosexual activism and religious freedom. The homosexual activists have put the ball on our ten-yard line, and it is first and goal. We can either put up a brave defensive stand or we can let them cross the goal line unhindered. If believers choose to do nothing, there may be a day that people of faith will have to tell their children and grandchildren, “I’m sorry. I did nothing to protect your religious freedom and now it’s gone.” (*Homosexual Agenda* 14-15)

According to Tim LaHaye, the nation’s ultimate fate in the wake of a gay activist victory will go beyond mere loss of religious liberty. He claims that “when sodomy fills the national cup of man’s abominations to overflowing, God earmarks that nation for destruction” (202).

There is one final anti-gay apocalyptic warning which is worth quoting. In his book *Sodom’s Second Coming*, F. LaGard Smith issues the following polemic:

Selling out to the gay movement, should that happen, will come at a very high price. In the church today, we are facing the very real prospect of abandoning our commitment to biblical authority. And if that is where we are headed, then we might as well go ahead now and turn out the lights. At that point, Sodom’s second coming will have been complete. (153)

The phrase “Sodom’s second coming”—a phrase so significant that it was chosen as the book’s title<sup>35</sup>—is an allusion to Genesis 19:1-29, one of the biblical narratives most frequently cited by anti-gay interpreters of the Bible. Thus is this passage of Smith’s one of those choice moments where one can see the background rhetoric of the anti-gay Religious Right interfacing with its foreground rhetoric—that is, its selection and framing of specific biblical passages. For both the anti-abolitionist and anti-gay movements, this foreground rhetoric employs a rich variety of such biblical passages.

### **ABSOLUTIST FOREGROUND RHETORIC, FIRST MOVEMENT: THE AGE OF THE PATRIARCHS**

The patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and a host of other figures—constitute a larger-than-life cast of characters. The book of Genesis tells their epic story, beginning with Adam, the father of all humanity, and concluding with Joseph and his adventures in Egypt. Along the way the reader encounters some of the Bible’s best known and most iconic tales—the ill-conceived tower of Babel, Noah’s ark, the interrupted sacrifice of Abraham’s son, and many more.

When conceptualized not merely as a collection of separate tales, but rather as a continuous and cohesive narrative, the epic of the patriarchs becomes a powerful tool for defining the role of divine authority in human affairs. In their military battles and in their family lives, in their economic activities and in their religious strivings, the patriarchs can become, for devout believers in the Bible, the models for ideal human governance and behavior. They have

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<sup>35</sup> The book’s cover blurb—“What You Need to Know About the Deadly Homosexual Assault”—gives the reader an indication of Smith’s tone.

been lionized as the giants who sealed humankind's earliest compacts with the almighty deity, and their stories, when read through this lens, become a goldmine of guidance for future generations.

### ***Genesis 4:8-15 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

The first passage of crucial interest to anti-abolitionists concerns Cain, son of the first human couple. After murdering his righteous brother, Abel, Cain faces the wrath of Yahweh:

What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now *art* thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand [. . .]. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. (Genesis 4:10,11,15)

There is, of course, nothing in this passage that deals directly with slavery. Nevertheless, Genesis 4:8-15 factored in white Christians' ideology about enslaved Africans. In his 1851 *Bible Defence of Slavery* Josiah Priest describes the theory linking this story to African peoples:

Others have imagined, that the mark set upon *Cain*, by the Divine Power, for the crime of *homicide*, was that of *jet*, which not only changed the color of his body, but extended to the blood and the whole of his physical being, thus originating the negro race, a remnant of which they suppose [. . .] outrode the flood, anchoring on some lofty mountain [. . .] till the earth was dried again. (v)

Interestingly, Priest, while a defender of slavery himself, rejects this particular theory of racial origin, consigning it to the trash heap of "baseless hallucinations" (v). Still, the notion that black-skinned peoples inherited a racial curse ultimately became part of white Christians'

justification for their enslavement of Africans. African-American writer David Walker described this chain of thought in his fiery abolitionist pamphlet *David Walker's Appeal*:

[S]ome ignorant creatures hesitate not to tell us that we, (the blacks) are the seed of Cain the murderer of his brother Abel [. . .]. I have searched the Bible as well as they, if I am not as well learned as they are, and have never seen a verse which testifies whether we are of the seed of Cain or of Abel. Yet these men tell us that we are the seed of Cain, and that God put a dark stain upon us, that we might be known as their slaves!! (60)

Ultimately the notion of black skin being the “mark of Cain” seeped into popular culture,<sup>36</sup> and ties directly to the next biblical passage of interest to anti-abolitionists.

#### ***Genesis 9:24,25 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

Family strife is a recurrent theme in the book of Genesis, and the story of the patriarch Noah is no exception. In contemporary popular culture Noah is best known for the story of his building of the ark, a tale which has become the topic of innumerable innocuous children's books and films. Less well known is the aftermath of this story, in which Noah's son Ham commits an

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<sup>36</sup> Groundbreaking African-born poet Phillis Wheatley, herself enslaved in the United States, alluded to this reading of Genesis 4:8-15 in her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” published in 1773:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

offense against his drunken, sleeping father.<sup>37</sup> The punishment for this offense is, via the weight of patriarchal decree, borne by Ham's son, Canaan: "And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (Genesis 9: 24,25). This passage became a lynchpin for the pro-slavery understanding not only of the relationship between African- and European-Americans, but also of the moral and social character of all African peoples. Anti-abolitionist writer Thornton Stringfellow sees an historic significance in this passage:

The first recorded language which was ever uttered in relation to slavery, is the inspired language on Noah. . . . Here, language is used, showing the *favor* which God would exercise to the posterity of Shem and Japheth, while they were holding the posterity of Ham in a state of *abject bondage*. . . . God *decreed slavery*—and shows in that decree, tokens of good-will to the master. (8, 9)

Thus for anti-abolitionists this passage becomes the first in a long chain of biblical texts which explicitly authorize and regulate slavery as a legal and social institution. Anti-abolitionist W.G. Brownlow, during an 1858 debate with Abram Pryne, linked the curse of Ham with the curse of Cain:

The descendants of Ham were *black*, and the black man of Africa is of that descent. "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain." This "*mark*" was a *black skin*. . . . The descendants of Ham were *black when born*. His wife, of the race of

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<sup>37</sup> Ken Stone notes , "The Talmud [. . .] indicates that certain rabbinic readers understood Ham to be guilty of either castration or homosexual incest" (*Practicing* 56). thus making this passage an ironic potential meeting point of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay biblical hermeneutics.

Cain, was a *negro wench* inheriting Cain's "*mark*", and that mark was a *black skin*. (Brownlow and Pryne 204).

In this act of connecting two biblical passages with nineteenth-century racial theory<sup>38</sup>, Brownlow demonstrates the systematic nature of anti-abolitionist rhetoric; this is one of those choice moments where one can glimpse the anti-abolitionist Bible<sub>T4</sub> being forcibly midwived from Bible<sub>T1</sub>, Bible<sub>T2</sub>, and Bible<sub>T3</sub>. Other writers further develop this reading of Genesis 9: 24 and

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the Mormon religion, founded in the 1830s, adopted this idea that Cain was cursed with a black skin, and that Ham transferred this curse to his own descendants by marrying a woman of Cain's lineage (Whalen, *The Latter-day Saints* 245, 246; Smith, *Way to Perfection* 110). This belief resulted in the Mormon priesthood being withheld from black-skinned church members until 1978, when the president of the Mormon Church announced that the racial priesthood restriction had been lifted via divine revelation (Kimball, Tanner and Romney). As odious as the "mark of Cain" and "curse of Ham" doctrines may be to most twenty-first century Americans, one might charitably note that these doctrines at the very least affirmed the humanity of African peoples. According to John Henry Hopkins, an alternate racial theory did not even go that far:

There have been philosophers and physiologists who contend that the African race were not strictly entitled to be called *men* at all, but were a sort of intermediate link between the baboon and the human being. For myself, however, I can only say that I repudiate the doctrine with my whole heart. The Scriptures show me that the negro, like all other races, descends from Noah, and I hold him to be a MAN AND A BROTHER. But though he be my *brother*, it does not follow that he is my *equal*. (32)

Abolitionist Maria W. Stewart, herself African-American, also alluded to this controversial racist theory in her 1831 pamphlet *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*. Addressing her fellow Americans of African ancestry, she exhorts, "Prove to the world that you are neither ourang-outangs, or a species of mere animals, but that you possess the same powers of intellect as the proud-boasting [white] American" (40).

25. John Henry Hopkins, for example, in his 1864 treatise accentuates the “curse of Ham” connection when presenting his assessment of the moral stature of African peoples. After offering up some stories about the alleged horrors African culture, Hopkins concludes: “Here, then, we have the best testimony, with which every subsequent writer agrees, as to the awful debasement, the groveling idolatry, the flagitious immorality, the *total degradation* of the posterity of Ham, in the slave-region of Africa” (69). Hopkins additionally observes, “The Almighty, foreseeing this total degradation of the race, ordained them to servitude or slavery under the descendants of Shem and Japheth” (7). Thus, with this gloss on the passage at hand, Hopkins draws on the fifth of the “background rhetoric” principles cited above.

***Genesis 16:6-9 (The Slavemaster’s Bible)***

While the Noah narrative cites a curse of enslavement, it is in the narratives surrounding his descendant Abram (whose name is later changed to Abraham) that the reader can begin to see the actual mechanics of slavery as a human institution. Believing herself unable to bear children, Abraham’s wife Sarai (later renamed Sarah) instructs her husband to attempt to father children through Sarai’s maidservant Hagar. But after Hagar conceives, tension between the two women leads to a crisis:

But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is *in* thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly [i.e. harshly; cf. NRSV] with her, she fled from her face. And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water [. . .]. And he said, Hagar, Sarai’s maid, whence comest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel



of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. (Genesis 16:6-9)

For Samuel How, this narrative provided a “strong test-case” towards the argument that slavery as an institution was not condemned by God (*Slaveholding not Sinful* 27). Thornton Stringfellow, in his *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*, offers a more thorough anti-abolitionist reading of this passage:

The divine oracles inform us, that the angel of God found this runaway bond-woman in the wilderness; and if God had commissioned this angel to improve this opportunity of teaching the world how much he abhorred slavery, he took a bad plan to accomplish it. For, instead of repeating a homily upon doing to others as we “would they should do unto us,” and heaping reproach upon Sarah, as a hypocrite, and Abraham as a tyrant, and giving Hagar direction how she might get into Egypt, from whence (according to Abolitionism) she had been unrighteously sold into bondage, the angel addressed her as “Hagar, Sarah’s maid,” [. . .] thereby recognizing the relation of master and slave [. . .]. (12, 13)

Stringfellow adds the Hagar “knew nothing of abolition, and God by his angel did not become her teacher” (13). For Stringfellow and his anti-abolitionist peers, the actions of the angel offer a model for the proper nineteenth-century attitude towards slavery—a model which, for Stringfellow, is diametrically opposed to abolitionist thought and practice. Stringfellow’s sarcastic reading not only cites the passage of hand but also paraphrases a New Testament verse, Matthew 7:12 (“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them”). His implication is that abolitionists rip biblical verses that do not pertain explicitly to slavery out of context, thereby misreading them and misusing them in an unjust condemnation

of slaveholding Christians. Thus in Stringfellow's words one can see another merging of the background and foreground rhetorics of the anti-abolitionists.

***Genesis 17:12, 13, 24, 27 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

As part of the covenant in which he receives the new name of Abraham, Abram is given the following directive from Yawheh: "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, ever man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money, of any stranger, which *is* not of thy seed" (Genesis 17:12). This reference to household members bought with money is repeated immediately (v. 13). The renamed Abraham obediently undergoes circumcision, as do all of his household—including those "bought with money" (vv. 24, 27). The fact that men "bought with money" are mentioned three times in the course in the course of the origin story of the rite of circumcision was not lost on anti-abolitionist readers. The anonymous author of the 1836 volume *The South Vindicated* declares,

From these passages, it is evident that slavery existed in the time of Abraham; that the patriarch was himself a slave-holder; that his slaves were not captives in war, nor convicts of crime, but "bought with money, of the stranger;" that Abraham, notwithstanding that he was a slave-holder, was the chosen of God among the families of the earth; and that God, in making the covenant, mentions the slaves, and implicitly sanctions their bondage. (89)

In his 1845 debate with J. Blanchard, slavery defender N.L. Rice alludes to these passages: "Why does not the gentleman act consistently, and denounce not only Abraham, the father of the fathful [sic], but the Bible itself? It is impossible for him to be a consistent abolitionist, without rejecting and denouncing the Bible" (Blanchard and Rice 192). These references to slavery, with

no condemnation of the institution, in the context of a solemn covenant between God and the father of all the Abrahamic religions, provided powerful fuel for the anti-abolitionist engine.

***Genesis 47:14-25 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Israel, rises to prominence as an interpreter of dreams for the Egyptian Pharaoh. His supernatural ability allows him to foresee a famine and also results in his appointment as a sort of prime minister, second in authority only to the monarch. Joseph's counsel regarding the famine results in a surplus in the royal grain storehouses; the general population; on the other hand, faces poverty and starvation. In this state of crisis the people of Egypt make the following plea to Joseph: "Wherefore shall we die before thine eyes, both we and our land? buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be servants unto Pharaoh: and give *us* seed, that we may live, and not die, that the land be not desolate" (Genesis 47:19). Although it could be argued that the Egyptians gave themselves into servitude voluntarily, it could also be claimed that the wily Joseph, by sharing his extrasensory foresight only with Pharaoh, put the populace at an unfair disadvantage, thus essentially setting them up for their eventual enslavement. Such a reading of Joseph is surely at odds with the romantic image of this character that has penetrated popular culture via Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and the inevitable children's picture books. Not surprisingly, it was Joseph as enslaver who captured the imaginations of the anti-abolitionist movement. An author identified only as "a Southern Clergyman" remarks of the enslaved Egyptians, "[T]hey felt the spirit of true gratitude for having their lives preserved on the terms of becoming slaves.—This then illustrates God's benevolent institution of slavery" (9). Thornton

Stringfellow sees this story as offering a model for the proper contemporary attitude towards slavery:

Joseph [. . .] created a state of entire *dependence* and *hereditary bondage* [. . .].  
How far the hand of God was in this overthrow of liberty, I will not decide; but from the fact that he has singled out the greatest slaveholders of that age, as the objects of his special favor, it would seem that the institution was one furnishing great opportunities to exercise grace and glorify God, as it still does, where its duties are faithfully discharged. (23)

Stringfellow's language in this passage is particularly pregnant with potential implications. By speculating that "the hand of God" played a part in the enslavement of the Egyptians, Stringfellow possibly alludes to a parallel argument that the enslavement of Africans and of Americans of African descent was not only in accord with divine will, but that this phenomenon may have actually been brought about by the unseen "hand of God." Stringfellow's reference to the duties of slavery being "faithfully discharged" is likely a barb aimed at escapees from slavery, including such celebrated individuals as Frederick Douglass, who, for anti-abolitionists like Stringfellow, implicitly failed to properly discharge their duties as slaves.<sup>39</sup> The rhetorical web woven by authors like Stringfellow around a biblical verse like Genesis 47:19 is, like a spider's web, both strong and sticky, with the ability to trap a wealth of cultural allusions and implications.

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<sup>39</sup> Stringfellow may also have had in mind the implied duties of the slavemaster towards his slave. For the theologically conservative defenders of slavery, the foremost of these duties would be the Christianization of the slaves, and continued spiritual oversight of those slaves who professed Christianity.

For anti-abolitionist authors, the Book of Genesis yielded some critical ammunition. Anti-gay activists in turn have unearthed two of their favorite pieces of ordnance from these same pages.

***Genesis 2:21-24 and 3:20 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

After creating Adam, the first man, the deity Yahweh realizes that this solitary human being needs a companion of his own species. While Adam sleeps Yahweh removes one of his ribs, and from that tissue fashions the first woman. The narrator observes, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Just as Adam enjoyed the privilege of naming the non-human animals of the earth and air (Genesis 2:19, 20), so too does he assign a name to the first human female: “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she was the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20).

Although these verses do not mention homosexuality at all, they have nonetheless assumed a significant place in the anti-gay Bible. This anti-gay role has only been enhanced with the acceleration of the worldwide movement to establish same-sex marriage as a legally recognized institution. Erwin W. Lutzer, for example, in a 2004 volume entirely devoted to attacking same-sex marriage from a Christian Right perspective, reflects at length on the Genesis account of Eve’s creation in his chapter entitled “We Must Consult the Designer’s Manual”<sup>40</sup> (45-56). He begins: “The Genesis account of creation gives us the best understanding of what we know about marriage, its meaning and purpose; and what happens when we violate the divine

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<sup>40</sup> Lutzer’s choice of the term “designer’s manual” is significant; it conveys the idea that the Bible is an inflexible document whose clear and authoritative instructions must be followed precisely, and that those who flout this manual do so at their own peril.

pattern. If we can understand what the Designer had in mind, we are better able to understand what is at stake in our same-sex marriage debate” (45). For Lutzer, homosexual marriage is such a violation of the divine plan. In *A Strong Delusion*, anti-gay author Joe Dallas also cites this biblical narrative: “While the phrase ‘God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’ seems flippant, it is a fair assessment of created intent” (188). The “Adam and Steve” pun has thoroughly seeped into American popular culture; online merchandisers have made available a variety of items bearing variations on the slogan: bumper stickers, t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, magnets, and even a thong.<sup>41</sup>

In the context of the cultural fight against the legalization of same-sex marriage, the Genesis account of Adam and Eve is often alluded to without being explicitly cited. Take, for example, the struggle over gay unions in Iowa. This state became a battleground in this conflict in December 2005, when a gay rights organization filed a lawsuit seeking to strike down a state law preventing same-sex marriage. Writing for the *Baptist Press*, Michael Foust included the following quote from Chuck Hurley, president of the anti-gay Iowa Family Policy Center: “One man, one woman marriage was set up by God Himself, and our laws simply acknowledge that. It would be the height of human arrogance for humankind to try to rewrite God's design for marriage.” Hurley’s words appear to allude to the Adam and Eve story; perhaps such coded rhetoric represents an attempt to access a deeply ingrained cultural narrative without appearing to be a stereotypical “Bible thumper.” Nonetheless, the website of Hurley’s organization leaves little doubt as to the biblical allusion behind his words. A section of the website entitled “Marriage: Defending Marriage in Iowa” includes a selection of “Sample Sermons” for use by

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the “Adam & Steve” gear offered by Amazon.com, BumperTalk, CafePress.com, and e-Shirt.com.

churches which might seek to join the Iowa Family Policy Center's political campaign against the legalization of same-sex marriage. One of the sermons included—Michael Hartwig's "Why Iowa Needs a Marriage Amendment"—not only quotes Genesis 2:20-24, but also contains the clichéd slogan "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

### ***Genesis 19:1-29 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

Probably the best-known biblical tale in the anti-gay arsenal is that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The term "sodomite" is still used by some anti-gay Christians as a synonym for "homosexual." The full story takes up most of Genesis 19. In brief: Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 11:27), had "pitched *his* tent toward Sodom"—a city whose men were known for their wickedness (Genesis 13:12, 13). While living in this region Lot is visited by two angels. The men of Sodom surround Lot's house and make the following demand: "Where *are* the men which came into thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them" (Genesis 19:5). Lot offers his two virgin daughters up to the mob in lieu of his guests, but this attempt to quell the Sodomite men, who remind him of his sojourner status (v. 9), fails. Lot, his guests and his daughters all escape the mob, and Yahweh destroys both Sodom and its sister city Gomorrah with "brimstone and fire" (v. 24).

The story of the destruction of Sodom is a rich and fascinating narrative that offers many angles from which the reader might approach it. Some of the issues one could raise include ethnic difference, immigrant status, violence (specifically rape) as a tool used to establish social dominance, the status of women relative to men in the ancient Middle East, and the role of hospitality codes in ancient Middle Eastern society. But for anti-gay author Greg L. Bahnsen this narrative boils down to a single issue: "We cannot avoid the obvious conclusion that God

destroyed the cities of the plain with a catastrophe because of the homosexuality of the Sodomites [. . .]. Sodom was utterly destroyed because it was a city full of homosexuals who day after day practiced their impious, sensual debauchery” (*Homosexuality* 34, 35). It is significant that Bahnsen uses the word “homosexuals”—which signifies the modern concept of a group of people defined by their sexual desires and/or behaviors—in his reading of this text; such a concept would have been alien, even incomprehensible to the writer of Genesis 19.<sup>42</sup> This rhetorical strategy of Bahnsen’s eerily echoes the hermeneutics of the anti-abolitionist writers, who constantly conflated nineteenth-century American slavery with the forms of enslavement described in biblical narratives.<sup>43</sup> Sterling Lacy takes Bahnsen’s reading strategy even further, claiming that “the men of Sodom were not just homosexual, they were ‘gay.’” But Lacy is not content merely with imposing modern terminology onto this ancient narrative. He continues his analysis of the men of Sodom: “They had engaged in perverted sexual practices with each other so often that when a new man came to town, they all lined up demanding to have

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<sup>42</sup> A more nuanced reading might compare this story to contemporary prison rape, a phenomenon in which heterosexual-identified men will use the rape of fellow inmates as a tool for establishing their positions within a social hierarchy. Susan Brownmiller’s writings about homosexual prison rape (*Against Our Will* 256-68), for example, offer an interesting lens through which one might look at Genesis 19.

<sup>43</sup> Howell Cobb, for example, makes the following claim early in his anti-abolitionist diatribe: “We assert, and we shall prove, that the system of slavery in the United States, in every feature and in every particular of every feature, is essentially the same as the system authorized by the Bible, and introduced into the church at the time of its organization, and continued to the present day” (9). Similarly, W.G. Brownlow states, “American slavery is not only not sinful, but especially commanded by God through Moses, and approved through the Apostles by Christ” (91).



sex with him” (24). Lacy demonstrates a practice often used by anti-gay interpreters of this story: he goes beyond the data presented in the text and makes assertions that he presents as fact—in this case, his claim regarding the Sodomites’ specific sexual history prior to the incident involving Lot and his angelic guests. This approach to the story is also taken by Tim LaHaye, who claims that the men of Sodom “were so perverted that they had no interest in women” (110); LaHaye’s supposition ignores the fact that the Sodomites may have had other motivations for rejecting Lot’s offer of his virgin daughters for gang rape. Such an imposition of contemporary concerns onto this ancient text mirrors the anti-abolitionist imposition of nineteenth-century racial mythology onto the narratives of Cain and Ham. Two other anti-gay writers with an interesting take on the Sodom narrative are John Ankerberg and John Weldon, in their 1994 book *The Facts on Homosexuality*. Regarding Lot’s choice to offer his daughters up for gang rape, Ankerberg and Weldon assert: “Lot was facing an emergency [. . .]. Acting out of sheer desperation and hopelessness, he proposes a lesser evil (heterosexual rape) in the place of a greater evil (homosexual rape)” (35). Ankerberg and Weldon’s reading of this narrative opens a Pandora’s box of disturbing questions.

## **ABSOLUTIST FOREGROUND RHETORIC, SECOND MOVEMENT: THE LAW OF MOSES**

The biblical books from Exodus through Deuteronomy tell the story of Moses, the great prophet who delivered a codified body of laws to the Hebrew people. There is perhaps no other figure in the entire Hebrew Bible who has attained such a culturally iconic status. Western culture is permeated with depictions of and allusions to Moses—Michelangelo’s commanding

sculpture of a horned Moses, Zora Neale Hurton's novelistic reimagining of his story, Sigmund Freud's study *Moses and Monotheism*, Charlton Heston's portrayal in one of Cecil B. De Mille's Hollywood epics, Mel Brook's comedic take in his film *History of the World, Part I*, children's books, dolls, and endlessly so forth. For the opponents of both abolitionism and the gay rights movement, the Law of Moses, as presented in these biblical books, adds a layer of legal certainty to the precedents established in the patriarchal era.

### ***Exodus 12:43-45 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

The first Mosaic passage involving slavery concerns the religious observance of Passover: "And the LORD said unto Moses and Aaron, This *is* the ordinance of the passover: There shall no stranger eat thereof: But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof. A foreigner and an hired servant shall not eat thereof" (Exodus 12:43-45). Of this passage N.L. Rice observes: "The contrast in which the hired servant is here placed with reference to the bondservant, as well as the words by which the two are respectively designated, proves beyond a question, that the latter was a slave" (Blanchard and Rice 267). George Junkin, in his 1843 anti-abolitionist opus, similarly focuses on this passage's distinction between the hired help and the individual who is actually bought with money. Junkin notes that the latter is "a permanent member of the household and under the master's control" (27); Junkin's words are apparently meant to justify the "control" which American slavemasters sought to preserve over their own human livestock.

***Exodus 20:17 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

For the absolutist reader of the Bible, the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), constitutes the “big guns” of the book of Exodus. These ten directives—personally delivered to Moses during a dramatic mountaintop theophany, and later repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21—have permanently ingrained themselves into the collective American conscience, thanks not only to generations of preachers and religious educators, but also such popular culture phenomena as Cecil B. DeMille’s two films entitled *The Ten Commandments* (one a 1923 silent epic, the second the aforementioned 1956 film starring Charlton Heston) and the ubiquitous wall hangings and monuments that may be found all over the country. Perhaps the most famous Decalogue monument was that installed by Roy Moore, former Chief Justice of the Alabama State Supreme Court, in the rotunda of the state justice building in 2001. A legal challenge to the constitutionality of Moore’s display led to a federal judge’s order to remove the monument; Moore’s refusal to obey the order resulted in his being removed from office by Alabama’s judicial ethics panel.<sup>44</sup>

The Ten Commandments were already iconic in American culture by the time of the debate over slavery. As the anonymous “Citizen of Georgia” writes in his undated anti-abolitionist tract, “‘The Ten Commandments, delivered with awful solemnity from Mount Sinai, and which are justly considered as the great outlines of the Holy Law of God, are intended, in their injunctions and directions, to be of universal obligation’” (10). The anti-abolitionist

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<sup>44</sup> Moore’s saga is detailed in CNN’s online articles “Moore: ‘I’ve kept my oath’” and “Ten Commandments judge removed from office.” In 2004 Richard Willing reported that less than a year after the order to remove Moore’s monument was issued, two dozen lawsuits involving similar monuments were active.

movement honed in on one verse of the Decalogue: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that *is* thy neighbor’s” (v. 17). W.G. Brownlow assesses this verse as follows:

The only interpretation of this portion of the word of God is, that the species of property herein mentioned, are *lawful*, and that all men are forbidden to disturb others in the lawful enjoyment of their property. “Man-servants and maid-servants,” are distinctly *consecrated as property*, and guaranteed to man for his exclusive benefit—proof that slavery was ordained by God himself. (Brownlow and Pryne 28)

Noteworthy in Brownlow’s reading are the absolutist power phraseology he uses: “[t]he only interpretation,” “all men,” “distinctly,” “proof”—words that carry auras of authority and universality. Like Brownlow, George Junkin stresses that the Decalogue “forbids interference with the *ownership* a man has in his servants and in his cattle”; he adds that “it legislates for the protection and welfare of the master or owner of the servant, of the cattle, ox, or ass.” This first mention of human servitude in the Law of Moses is fairly general in nature; ensuing passages are more specific, and equally of interest to anti-abolitionist authors.

### ***Exodus 21:2-6 (The Slavemaster’s Bible)***

Exodus 21:2-6 is a fairly lengthy directive on the topic of servitude, and one which might strike twenty-first century readers as particularly alien in sensibility:

If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years shall he serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing. If he come in by himself, he shall go out by himself:

if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: Then his master shall bring him unto the judges, he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him for ever.

It is from this passage that George Armstrong claims the following three biblical truths can be determined: “1. *Slavery is a relation formed without the consent of the slave being first obtained* [. . .]. 2. *It is a relation for life* [. . .]. 3. *It is a relation which cannot be lawfully terminated without the consent of both parties.*” (106, 107). Other anti-abolitionist activists similarly discussed this passage in language that similarly positions it as a source of authoritative guidance regarding nineteenth-century slavery. John Henry Hopkins, for example, declares, “This is a plain proof that, *in the case of slavery*, marriage was not allowed to interfere with the master's right of property” (84). And according to George Junkin, “Now, in this case the law is explicit, the children are slaves, when the mother is” (32). Such uses of Exodus 21:2-6 had a real impact on the lives of American slaves. Junkin continues his reading of this passage:

We have heard a great deal said about the barbarity of the law maxim, *pars sequitur ventrem* [i.e. *partus sequitur ventrem*, meaning that the child follows the condition of the mother], as containing a doctrine, too horrible, and vile, to be spoken in the English language. Brethren ought first to enquire whether a doctrine is taught in the Bible, before they allow themselves to be horrified by it.

(32)

His words directly challenge abolitionist rhetoric in a taunting, sarcastic tone.

***Exodus 21:16 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

The next anti-abolitionist proof-text is something of a double-edged sword in that some abolitionists cited it as an anti-slavery text: "And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:16). Anti-abolitionist writer John Richter Jones cites this verse as "the main scriptural authority which is cited against slavery" (17); J.K. Paulding further identified it as the only text that the abolitionists "have been able to bring directly to bear" upon the topic of slavery (14). At the crux of the debate over this verse is what indeed constitutes the stealing of another human being. Paulding goes on to state, that contrary to the anti-slavery reading of this verse,

Slavery is made the subject of express regulation in the social institutions of the Jews, and this without a single expression of disapprobation on the part of the divine Lawgiver. It is evident, therefore, that the denunciation of death to the man-stealer is not applicable to those who hold slaves by capture in war, by purchase, or by inheritance. Its object was unquestionably the same with that of the law of the southern states, which inflicts a heavy punishment on those who steal or entice away slaves from their rightful owners. It was a law for the security of this species of property. (14, 15).

Paulding's anti-abolitionist reading of this verse significantly alludes to a number of other biblical passages<sup>45</sup> while attempting to demonstrate the concordance of nineteenth-century

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<sup>45</sup> Paulding may have had in mind such verses as Genesis 17:12, Exodus 12:44, and Leviticus 25:44 (which mention slaves purchased with money); 1 Kings 9:20 and 21 (a passage

Southern slave law with Mosaic slave law. Also included in his commentary is a swipe at the Underground Railroad—“those who steal away or entice away slaves.”<sup>46</sup> The confidence with which writers like Jones demolished any anti-slavery reading of Exodus 21:16 demonstrates the peril faced by anti-slavery advocates who attempted to combat anti-abolitionists with their own tools—that is, by attempting to force anti-slavery readings of biblical passages using absolutist hermeneutics. Such was ultimately a losing strategy; thus it is noteworthy that the most enduring monuments of abolitionist literature reference the Bible with very different techniques.

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concerning a tribute of slavery imposed upon conquered peoples); and Leviticus 25:46 (which mentions slaves as an inheritance).

<sup>46</sup> Although other anti-abolitionist writers also drew a pro-slavery message from this passage, their exact logic was not necessarily the same as Paulding’s. Josiah Priest, for example, writes that the death sentence of Exodus 21:16 “was intended to prevent one *Hebrew* from stealing, capturing, and selling another *Hebrew*” (334). In other words, for Priest the verse reflected a prohibition against *intraethnic* slavery while allowing *interethnic* slavery; such a reading further implies that the slavery practiced by the whites of the American South was biblically sound due to its interethnic nature. John Richter Jones similarly employs a different logic to arrive at reading which, while still firmly anti-abolitionist, differs from that readings of both Jones and Priest. Jones writes of this verse:

So far from being against slavery, it shows clearly its legal existence in the Jewish community; for, if property in slaves had not been recognized, the prohibiting the “stealing a man” would have been very useless legislation. You cannot steal a man, so that he may be found in your hand in Pennsylvania; in a slave State you may. (17)

In other words, one could only steal a human being if that person was already the property of another person; thus for Jones this verse is implicitly pro-slavery. So confident, apparently, is Jones in this logic that he declares, “If [. . .] the other Jewish laws, which I have quoted, were swept away, this provision would still be sufficient for my argument” (17).

***Exodus 21:20, 21 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

A common theme in American slave narratives is the exposé of the physical abuses inflicted upon the enslaved by their masters. Curiously, one of the anti-abolitionists' prooftexts dealt with such abuse: "And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished. Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he *is* his money" (Exodus 21:20, 21). This passage reads as even more chilling in a more contemporary translation: "When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property" (NRSV). Thornton Stringfellow affirms of these verses, "Now, we have laws that authorize the holding of men and women in bondage, and chastising them with the rod, with a severity that terminates in death" (31). Anti-abolitionist Fred Ross, in his take on this passage, employs the typical tactic of comparing American slavery to ancient biblical slavery: "Now, sir, I affirm that God was more lenient to the degraded Hebrew master than Southern laws are to the higher Southern master in like cases" (62). In other words, the benevolent American South—according to Ross—imposes stricter controls upon the physical punishment of slaves than is required by the Bible. The anti-abolitionists were well aware that accounts of the physical punishment of slaves had the potential to elicit strong emotional and moral reactions from potential converts to the abolitionist cause; thus does Thornton Stringfellow draw a burning line in the sand as he continues to reflect upon Exodus 20:21 and 22:

And he who believes the Bible to be of divine authority, believes these laws were given by the Holy Ghost to Moses. I understand modern abolition sentiments to be sentiments of marked hatred against such laws; to be sentiments which would



hold God himself in abhorrence, if he were to give such laws his sanction; but he has given them his sanction; therefore, they must be in harmony with his moral character. (31)

These words raise the important anti-abolitionist argument that to truly be anti-slavery requires one to be both anti-Bible and anti-God; perhaps Stringfellow felt he needed such a weighty argument to counter the revulsion that many would have felt over the harsh physical punishment of slaves. Continuing his own gloss on this passage, Fred Ross echoes Stringfellow's rhetorical strategy with the following taunt: "But there you have what was the divine will. Find fault with God, ye anti-slavery men, if you dare" (62, 63). Such anti-abolitionist writings ultimately lead to the notion that bringing physical suffering, or even death, to other human beings can be biblically justified; the narratives produced by actual survivors of slavery eloquently testify of the real results of such an ideology.

***Leviticus 25:44-46 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

As difficult as Exodus 21:20 and 21 may be for contemporary readers to stomach, they may be even more disturbed by the next important anti-abolitionist prooftext:

Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, *shall be* of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover, of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them ye shall buy, and of their families that *are* with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit *them for* a possession; they shall be your

bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour. (Leviticus 25:44-46)

This passage deals with three critical subtopics that fall under the general rubric of enslavement: interethnic slavery, enslavement as a permanent condition, and slaves as inheritable property. Because each such subtopic played a significant role in the slaveowning culture of the American South, it is unsurprising that Leviticus 25:44-46 emerges as one of the passages most cited in anti-abolitionist literature. Particularly vivid is the absolutist power phraseology used by the defenders of slavery in their commentaries on these verses. Consider, for example Thornton Stringfellow's words: "I ask any candid man, if the words of this institution could be more explicit? It is from God himself" (29). Similarly, Albert Bledsoe declares that "these words are so perfectly explicit, that there is no getting around them" (300); implied in such commentary is the accusation that abolitionists are in fact trying to get around these scriptural laws.

Other anti-abolitionists also used particularly pointed absolutist language in their glosses on Leviticus 25:44-46; the passage emerges as favorite a textual battleground on which to challenge anti-slavery hermeneutics. John Henry Hopkins writes, "The distinction here made, between the temporary servitude of the Israelite and the perpetual bondage of the heathen race, is too plain for controversy" (10, 11). Fred Ross also champions this passage as a paragon of biblical clarity: "Sir, I do not see how God could tell us more plainly that he did command his people to buy slaves from the heathen round about them [. . .]. The passage has no other meaning" (63). Later in his pro-slavery opus Ross returns to these verses: "Sir, the sun will grow dim with age before that scripture can be tortured to mean any thing else than just what it says; that God commanded the Israelites to be slave-holders in the strict and true sense over the heathen, in manner and form therein set forth" (148). Ross' language appears to be quite

deliberate; the defenders of slavery did indeed portray the abolitionists as people who tortured the Bible in order to wring from it utterly unbiblical teachings.

Leviticus 25:44-46 was also favored by anti-abolitionist authors as a site for conflating nineteenth-century American slavery with ancient Israelite slavery. Howell Cobb puts it succinctly: “Slaves were to be procured by the Israelites, from the heathen round about them; so they have been procured by the people of the South” (43). Commenting on the reference to lifetime enslavement in verse 46, the anonymous “Citizen of Georgia” observes, “This is a period of servitude as extensive as can be found in the slave-holding states of the Union” (10). And finally, J.K. Paulding offers the following reading of the passage: “Here is a direct sanction of the rights corresponding in all respects with those of the holders of slaves in the United States” (19). Paulding’s commentary is particularly worthy of note in his emphasis on the “rights” of the slaveholders. A common theme in abolitionist literature was the idea that enslaved persons’ fundamental human rights—to freedom from physical abuse, to basic human dignity—were inevitably violated in an inherently corrupt institution.<sup>47</sup> Paulding attempts to flip this paradigm by asserting that the abolitionist movement is not a defender of rights, but rather a trampler of rights. Although such a claim may strike twenty-first century readers as Orwellian doublespeak, it undoubtedly touched some receptive nerves among many audiences. Paulding writes further in his commentary upon this passage:

It is difficult to conceive how [. . .] the abolitionists can persist in maintaining that slavery is contrary to the law of God; or that the denunciation of death to the

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<sup>47</sup> This particular abolitionist theme may have, for nineteenth century readers, brought to mind the “inalienable rights”—among which were numbered “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—cited in the Declaration of Independence (15).

“man-stealer” has any reference whatever to the case of the holders of slaves in the United States. So to apply it, is to make the word of God a tissue of contradictions unworthy of its divine Author (20).

With this “man-stealer” reference Paulding ties his reading of Leviticus 25:44-46 to the debate over the proper reading of Exodus 21:16. He asserts that an anti-slavery interpretation of the Exodus verse would lead to an unraveling of the very fabric of the Bible. Paulding’s commentary is characteristic of the sophistication of many anti-abolitionist writers; not only does he bring together two different biblical passages, but he ties his argument to a broader condemnation of abolitionist hermeneutics.

One final anti-abolitionist gloss on Leviticus 25:44-46 is worth mentioning. Commenting upon both this passage and upon Exodus 12:44, George Junkin addresses the revulsion which many readers might feel over the conditions of enslavement authorized by these biblical verses: “But, it will be said, this is horrible! human beings bought as *property*, and held as a possession permanent! Well, abhor it then, if it is horrible. But, there it is on the sacred page. I have not asserted it, it is God’s assertion” (38). Junkin’s strategy attempts to invalidate the abolitionist appeal to the idea that enslavement violates certain inalienable human rights. Junkin also washes his hands—and indeed, the hands of all involved in the maintenance or defense of the institution of slavery—of any guilt derived from the reduction of human beings to livestock. His statement, “I have not asserted it, it is God’s assertion” is echoed in contemporary times by the ubiquitous phrase “God said it. I believe it. That settles it,” which can be found on bumper stickers and

other paraphernalia.<sup>48</sup> Such a mindset gives people the freedom to tolerate the marginalization or abuse of others as long as actions can be justified by biblical passages.

### ***Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

The anti-gay use of the codified laws of Moses relies on two verses from Leviticus:<sup>49</sup>  
“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it *is* abomination” (18:22) and “If a man

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<sup>48</sup> A variety of products (bumper sticker, license plate frame, mugs, t-shirts, wall clock, greeting cards, postcards, button, coaster, magnet, mousepad, hooded sweatshirt) bearing this phrase, or a variation thereof, are available online from such retailers as BumperArt.com and CafePress.com. Both these products and the “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” products mentioned in note 41 above call to mind the following comments made by theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid in her study *Indecent Theology*:

Amongst the people at the margins, for instance amongst the urban outcasts of our [i.e. Latin American] big cities, the Bible is not a book, but a collection of sayings and vague moral prescriptions which people remember from the media or political discourse, but not from an actual reading of the text. In the 1980s I used to work in a popular project of a church in Buenos Aires which fed five hundred beggars per day. For a time, I was in charge of the Friday Bible study, but I have never seen beggars carrying Bibles in their bags or pockets. Most of them did not even know how to read. However, there is another Bible, that which has been created by five hundred years of Christianity in the continent. This is the Bible of popular proverbs and selected images. (130)

Like the beggars described in this passage, the consumers of “not Adam and Steve” or “God said it” gear are tapping into and disseminating a “Bible of popular proverbs and selected images.” However, in the latter case it is not an illiterate, marginalized class of people which is using such a Bible; rather, it is a literate and privileged class—a group with both disposable income for such items, as well as Internet access and credit cards—who use these biblically-derived proverbs in order to participate in a cultural campaign of marginalization against lesbians and gay men.

also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood *shall be* upon them” (20:13). One point of contention between anti-gay and gay-positive adherents of the Bible is whether these verses condemn homosexuality *per se*, or whether they merely condemn male homosexual acts that are committed within a narrowly constrained context. Ankerberg and Weldon offer the standard anti-gay assessment: “[N]o one can logically maintain that God is not condemning homosexuality *per se* in these passages” (38). Anti-gay activist Tim LaHaye reflects as follows on the death penalty proscribed in Leviticus 20:13:

This may seem “cruel and inhuman treatment” by today’s standards, but our leniency has caused today’s widespread problems. This is not to suggest that Christians advocate the death penalty for today’s homosexuals, but I do have a question that needs consideration. Who is *really* being cruel and inhuman—those whose leniency allows homosexuality to spread to millions of victims who would not otherwise have been enticed into this sad and lonely life style, or those who practiced Old Testament capital punishment? (107).

LaHaye’s commentary is worthy of note for a number of reasons. First, his flippant use of the phrase “cruel and inhuman treatment” is evidently an attempt to counter the gay activist strategy of championing gay rights as a component of overall human rights; such a pro-gay strategy often

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<sup>49</sup> Which is not to say that anti-gay interpreters of the Bible ignore the rest of the Mosaic law. Consider the following commandment from the Decalogue: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Richard Fowler and H. Wayne House make the following claim about this injunction: “The commandment against adultery probably should be read as including an injunction against homosexual sin” (128). However, most anti-gay use of Exodus through Deuteronomy understandably focuses on the two notorious Leviticus passages.

focuses on such cruel and inhuman treatment when it is applied to gay individuals.<sup>50</sup> LaHaye's attempt to invalidate this pro-gay strategy eerily reflects the language of anti-abolitionist writers—such as in J.K. Paulding's and George Junkin's aforementioned glosses on Leviticus 25:44-48—who attempted to counter anti-slavery appeal to human rights. For both anti-abolitionists and opponents of gay rights, an appeal to the concept of fundamental human rights is irrelevant when those claimed “rights” stand in opposition to biblical injunctions.

In this commentary LaHaye also taps into the anti-gay cultural narrative about homosexuality—a narrative that claims that homosexuality can be “spread” like a disease, that its practitioners are “victims” of a loathsome addiction, and that it inevitably leads to sadness and loneliness for these dysfunctional victims. LaHaye even uses the popular code phrase “life style” in his comments. His particular word choice mirrors that of anti-abolitionists—such as John Henry Hopkins, in his rant which alludes to Genesis 9:24 and 25—who incorporated into their biblical glosses racist stereotypes of blacks as being childlike savages, desperately in need of both Christianization and the civilizing discipline of enslavement. Both slavery's defenders and the advocates of anti-gay legislation trumpet the Bible as a tool by which society can control populations that are otherwise deviant and dangerous threats to proper white/heterosexual Christian civilization.

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<sup>50</sup> The emergence of murder victim Matthew Shepard as an icon for gay rights activists in the late 1990s reflects this emotionally charged strategy. Shepard's literal crucifixion upon a cross-shaped section of fence on a cold Wyoming night was, for many, the ultimate example of “cruel and unusual” treatment meted out to a person for being gay. LaHaye's commentary on Leviticus 20:13, which is taken from a 1980 volume, may strike many as particularly disturbing in the wake of the Shepard murder.

A third critical aspect of LaHaye's commentary is his take on the death penalty proscribed in Leviticus. Although he phrases his challenge as a question, he is essentially suggesting that those who enforce death sentences against practicing homosexuals are actually kinder than those misguided individuals who tolerate gay people and who support legal rights for gays. LaHaye's musing raises the question: are there individuals within America's Christian Right who would seriously support the enactment of capital punishment for homosexuality if they could ever gain sufficient influence over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government at multiple echelons? Gay activist Mel White, himself a devout Christian, regularly encounters a broad cross-section of the Religious Right in his work with the advocacy group Soulforce.<sup>51</sup> In his 2006 book *Religion Gone Bad* White makes the following claim with regard to the Leviticus death sentence: "I have met fundamentalist Christians, clergy and laity alike who take the whole verse seriously and warn me in letters and on radio talk shows that it is God's will that I be executed for accepting my homosexuality as God's gift" (108). The liberal advocacy group People for the American Way similarly reports a certain vocal grassroots sentiment in favor of capital punishment for homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> Even if a desire to institute such a civil statute

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<sup>51</sup> On its homepage Soulforce describes its aim: "Freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from religious & political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance."

<sup>52</sup> In an undated article, entitled "The Death Penalty for Homosexuality," the organization reports the following:

On the September 4, 1998 Armstrong Williams talk show, Colorado talk-radio personality Bob Enyard called for the death penalty for gays and adulterers. Last year, a Christian radio talk-show host in Costa Mesa, California said, "Lesbian love, sodomy are viewed by God as being detestable and abominable. Civil magistrates are to put people to death who practice these things." The announcer



lies merely at the fringes of American culture, it is nonetheless true that more “tolerant” anti-gay readers of the Bible still consider the Leviticus death penalty to be significant. In his article “The Bible and Homosexual Practice,” Robert A.J. Gagnon, for example, observes the following:

In Leviticus 20 male-male intercourse appears in the midst of other first-tier sexual offenses punishable by a death sentence: adultery, sex with one’s stepmother or one’s daughter-in-law, male-male sex, marriage to mother and daughter at the same time, and human animal sex [. . .]. Today we discard the penalty for each of the offenses in Lev. 20:10-16 but not the emphatic prohibition.

The penalty still underscores the seriousness of the offense [. . .]. (64).

Gagnon’s message is that while, as an enlightened and tolerant modern Christian he does not believe that the death penalty should currently be applied to practicing homosexuals, the presence of that death penalty in the Bible is still relevant and goes towards justifying a contemporary Christian condemnation of homosexual behavior.

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urged listeners to contact legislators and ask that they enact capital punishment for homosexuality. The station manager called the program “an honest dialogue concerning Christian beliefs.”

The article also notes that militant anti-abortion advocate Randall Terry, former head of Operation Rescue, “extends this view of ‘Biblical law’ to include ‘Biblical slavery’”—indicating a curious confluence of anti-gay and pro-slavery thought.

**ABSOLUTIST FOREGROUND RHETORIC, THIRD MOVEMENT:  
APOSTOLIC REAFFIRMATION**

Biblical proofs from the Hebrew Bible have played a critical role in the rhetoric of both the defenders of slavery and the opponents of gay rights. But for the Christians fighting such battles, these biblical proofs are incomplete without counterparts from the New Testament. For both groups, the apostolic epistles—constituting Romans through Jude—are the key New Testament sources of prooftexts. And the logic behind such prooftexting is evident. For Christians, the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus signaled the birth of a new dispensation—an epoch in which many of the peculiarities of Patriarchal precedent and Mosaic law are either reaffirmed or replaced by new strictures. Romans through Jude consists of letters, written by authoritative leaders of the early Christian church, to both congregations and individuals. Containing a treasury of instructions and pronouncements, this mass of epistles is often quoted as if it were a new body of divine law—a “how-to” manual for both church governance and individual behavior. Ultimately some of the passages most often quoted by both anti-abolitionists and anti-gay activists are drawn from these ancient Christian letters.

***1 Corinthians 7:20-22 (The Slavemasters’s Bible)***

Writing to the early church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul offers the following advice: “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called *being* a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, *being* a servant, is the Lord’s freeman likewise also he that is called, *being* free, is Christ’s servant” (1 Corinthians 2:20-22). Commenting on this and other New Testament verses, George

Armstrong observes, “Paul treated the distinctions which slavery creates as matters of very little importance, in so far as the interests of the Christian life are concerned” (103). This line of theological thinking fell in perfect accordance with anti-abolitionist politics.

In his commentary<sup>53</sup> on verse 21, contemporary scholar Victor Paul Furnish notes that the translation of the latter part of the verse is uncertain; for comparison to the King James Version’s rather ambiguous words, the New Revised Standard Version reads, “Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever”—a reading which, ironically, seems to strengthen a pro-slavery exegesis. However, anti-abolitionist writers did not need to worry over the ambiguities of this particular verse; the rest of the New Testament offered ample passages from which they continued to build their case.

### ***Ephesians 6:5, 6 and Colossians 3:22, 23 (The Slavemaster’s Bible)***

The Apostle Paul was credited with another favorite anti-abolitionist proof-text: “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (Ephesians 6:5, 6). Of this passage<sup>54</sup> Albert Bledsoe writes, “‘*Servants, obey your masters*’ is one of the most explicit

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<sup>53</sup> Furnish’s introduction and annotations to 1 Corinthians are featured in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*.

<sup>54</sup> Ironically, a reading of this passage that is very much in line with pro-slavery camp is attributed to Jupiter Hammon, an African-American slave who predated Phillis Wheatley as a published poet. In *An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York*, published in 1787, Hammon declares the following with regard to Ephesians 6:5 and 6: “Here is God’s plain command for us to obey our masters. It may seem hard for us, if we think our masters wrong in

precepts of the New Testament [. . .]. The obligation of the slave to obey his master could be placed upon no higher, no more sacred, no more impregnable ground” (351, 352). The words in Ephesians 6:5 and 6 are repeated almost verbatim, as translated in the King James Version, in Colossians 3:22 and 23—“Servants, obey in all things *your* masters, according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” The latter passage, by adding the qualification that servants need to obey “in all things,” appears to intensify the biblical mandate of responsibility placed on the enslaved.

The seemingly cut-and-dried nature of these and other New Testament passages<sup>55</sup> led John Henry Hopkins to declare, “The evidence of the New Testament is thus complete, plainly proving that the institution of slavery was not abolished by the Gospel” (15). And with this statement Hopkins makes a crucial anti-abolitionist point. By this point in history many generations of Christians had jettisoned those portions of Mosaic law which were seen as confined to the Mosaic dispensation, and thus no longer binding upon Christians. The test as to whether or not one of Moses’ strictures still carried weight among Christians was simple: Is this law overturned in the New Testament, or rather, is it reaffirmed? Whereas such laws as the Mosaic dietary restrictions were lifted, the anti-abolitionists argued that passages such as Ephesians 6:5 and 6 and Colossians 3:22 and 23 reaffirmed the divine sanction of slavery as an institution.

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holding us slaves, to obey in all things, but who of us dares dispute with God! He has commanded us to obey, and we ought to do it cheerfully and freely” (232). Hammon’s use of the phrase “all things” indicates that he probably also had Colossians 3:22 in mind.

<sup>55</sup> Hopkins also references Colossians 4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1-8 and Philemon vv. 5, 10, and 19 with regard to this statement.

### ***1 Timothy 6:1-5 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

Anti-abolitionists not only found verses with which to defend slavery in the apostolic epistles, but they also found a passage which they claimed was explicitly condemnatory of the abolitionist movement:

Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and *his* doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren, but rather do *them* service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort.

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmising, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself! (1 Timothy 6:1-5)

Regarding these verses E.N. Elliot, in the introduction to his anti-abolitionist anthology *Cotton Is King*, declares that the apostle Paul “has, with prophetic vision, drawn the exact portrait of our modern abolitionists” (x). For writers like Elliot, this biblical passage tied into the larger argument that abolitionists were not just rejecting parts of the Bible, but rather standing against divine revelation and authority in its entirety. Elliot, for example, continues his gloss on these verses as follows: “Is it any wonder that after receiving such a castigation, they [i.e abolitionists] should totally repudiate the authority of God’s law, and say, ‘Not *thy* will, but *mine* be done’” (xi). Elliot’s depiction of the abolitionists as, in essence, making a mockery of the Lord’s Prayer

through their teachings and practices, is a particularly biting piece of rhetoric, and an attempt to indicate that abolitionists challenge not only the words of Paul, but the very words of Jesus himself.<sup>56</sup> Another anti-abolitionist activist who tied the “abolitionists-as-heretics” theme into his reading of 1 Timothy 6:1-5 was George Armstrong: “This course [i.e. abolitionism] has led not a few, once fair and promising members of the Church, and even ministers, into open ‘blasphemy;’ and Paul teaches us, that such is its natural tendency” (146).

These verses from 1 Timothy were also cited anti-abolitionist writers in the context of another of their recurring themes: namely, that the bible speaks with unambiguous clarity on the slavery issue. E.N. Elliott, for example, writes, “It is here explicitly declared that this doctrine, the obedience of slaves to their masters, are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the arguments of its opposers are [. . .] unworthy of reply and refutation” (xi). Similarly does Howell Cobb pontificate upon this passage: “It is easy to perceive here, that it is the intention of the apostle to protect the relation of master and slave, from the assaults of mischievous intermeddlers. How distinct is the apostle in all this! if he had written to-day, he could not have been more explicit” (87). Unsurprisingly, both Elliot and Cobb pile on absolutist power phraseology in these glosses—“explicitly declared,” “easy to perceive,” and so forth.

Howell Cobb continues his above cited commentary on this 1 Timothy passage as follows: “Will those to whom this rebuke applies, be admonished by it? Most likely, they will not” (87). These words underscore a fundamental thrust of the anti-abolitionist argument: the

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<sup>56</sup> Recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, and repeated in a shortened form in Luke 11:2-4, the Lord’s Prayer is one of the most familiar passages from the gospels. In his commentary Elliot satirically attributes to the abolitionist movement a blasphemous parody of part of verse 10 from the Matthew version: “Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven.”

assertion that the biblical injunctions regarding slavery were not historic artifacts, applicable only to individuals within a narrowly proscribed cultural and temporal context, but rather that these rules and regulations remained applicable to both slaves and to would-be abolitionists in the nineteenth century United States. Such an approach to the Bible would be kept alive by anti-gay exegetes long after the slavery question had been settled in the United States.

***Titus 2:9, 10 (The Slavemaster's Bible)***

The letter to Titus essentially repeats the command of two earlier Pauline passages—Ephesians 6:5 and 6 and Colossians 3:22 and 23—while adding some further elements: “*Exhort* servants to be obedient unto their own masters, *and* to please *them* well in all *things*; not answering again; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Titus 2:9, 10). This notion of a slave’s obedience as an adornment to sacred doctrine gave George Junkin a starting point for a particularly pointed piece of anti-abolitionist discourse:

The glory of God is promoted by the cheerful obedience and faithful conduct of Christian slaves. Such conduct adorns the doctrine of God our Saviour. Now, we put it to our Brethren, whether this course of conduct, in Christian slaves, is not much more likely to win their masters, and all others to embrace the doctrine from which it springs, than the stealing and running off, which they [i.e. abolitionists] recommend. Are those engaged in running negroes to Canada “adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things?” We put it to your consciences, Brethren! (55, 56)

According to Junkin’s gloss on this Titus passage, slaves do much more than simply obey God’s will when they give loyal service to their lawful owners; rather, they act as exemplars of

Christian doctrine, and thereby may become living tools of evangelization. Thus Junkin ties Titus 2:9 and 10—and thereby the slavery issue—to the command known popularly as the “Great Commission”: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). With this rhetorical move Junkin positions the slavery question as one that strikes at the very core of Christian doctrine. His swipe at the Underground Railroad—the network of individuals who helped escaping slaves make their way up north—once again underscores the anti-abolitionist theme that the Bible speaks directly against the teachings and actions of both rebellious slaves and their allies.

### ***Philemon (The Slavemaster’s Bible)***

Although it is one of the shortest books of the New Testament—one of a handful that are not even subdivided into chapters—the letter to Philemon is nonetheless one of the most significant of the epistles for the anti-abolitionists. Attributed to Paul, this letter is addressed to a slaveowner named Philemon and concerns the addressee’s escaped slave, Onesimus. Paul sends Onesimus back to his master with the following message:

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus [. . .] Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and me: Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him [. . .] Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. (Philemon vv. 9-14)



Paul is essentially returning this formerly “unprofitable” slave back to his lawful master.<sup>57</sup>

The letter to Philemon fueled anti-abolitionist rhetoric on a number of levels. First, it was seen as furnishing “a distinguished instance in which the justice and legality of slavery is admitted” (*South Vindicated* 96), thereby linking it to a long chain of such texts stretching back to the book of Genesis. Second, this epistle apparently offered a specific mention of a Christian slaveowner. As George Armstrong puts it in a rhetorical question, “Could we have clearer evidence than this that the Apostles received slave-holders into the Church, and continued them therein, seeing in their slave-holding nothing inconsistent with ‘having a good conscience before God’ and ‘good standing’ in the Church?” (28). Third, this passage was seen as significant with regard to the issue of escaped slaves. The anonymous “Citizen of Georgia” expressed this approach thus: “The Apostle Paul not only recognized as legal the relationship of master and servant, but took great pains to restore a runaway slave to his owner” (14). Other anti-abolitionist writers went even farther than the Citizen of Georgia in their glosses, suggesting that Paul actually apprehended the runaway slave<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In his commentary on Philemon for *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, Ronald F. Hock observes that this letter’s “unusually deferential and indirect language and the very nature of a letter as only one half of a conversation make it difficult for later readers to know its occasion and contents as precisely as the first ones did” (2247). He further explains that the letter “speaks so obliquely of Onesimus’s situation—e.g., his being ‘separated’ from Philemon (v. 15)—that it is far from certain whether Onesimus was a runaway. Likewise, the letter speaks so disarmingly of Philemon’s responsibility toward Onesimus [. . .] that it is unclear what Paul’s intentions for Philemon really were” (2247, 2248). Nonetheless, anti-abolitionist authors stated their interpretation of this curious epistle with unwavering certitude.

<sup>58</sup> Making this claim were W.G. Brownlow (Brownlow and Pryne 78) and James Henry Hammond (107).

Because of the multiple layers which they found in this epistle, anti-abolitionist writers considered it to be a useful club with which to directly attack abolitionists. As the Citizen of Georgia observes, “Had Paul been influenced by the spirit of our modern Abolitionists, he would probably have disregarded the master’s rights in this case, and have encouraged the slave to continue in a course of disobedience, and have aided in obstructing, rather than promoting, his return to duty” (15). Similarly, Thornton Stringfellow declares, “O, how immeasurably different Paul’s conduct to this slave and his master, from that of the conduct of our Abolition brethren!” (101). Such commentary attempts to morally invalidate not only the rhetoric of abolitionists, but also the actions of those involved with the Underground Railroad.

### ***1 Peter 2:18-20 (The Slavemaster’s Bible)***

Although the lion’s share of the anti-abolitionists’ New Testament prooftexts are attributed to the apostle Paul, his fellow apostle Peter is credited with the following verses:

Servants, *be* subject to *your* masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this *is* thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory *is it*, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer *for it*, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. (1 Peter 2:18-20)

This passage furthered the pro-slavery biblical case on two counts. W.G. Brownlow covers the first count: “Even the right to ‘buffet’, which is esteemed so shocking to Abolitionists, finds its express license in the gospel” (Brownlow and Pryne 91). Brownlow derives his reading from the distinction the biblical author draws between, on one hand, wrongful suffering, and on the other, a buffeting earned by the slave through his or her own “faults.” Thornton Stringfellow addresses

the second count: “What an important document this is! enjoining [. . .] Christian subjection on the part of servants to their masters, whether good or bad; for the purpose of showing forth to advantage, the *glory of the gospel*” (97).

This passage from 1 Peter, together with Thornton Stringfellow’s gloss on it, is especially significant in light of certain other New Testament passages. 1 Timothy 6:2, among other verses, specifically mentions Christian slaveholders. Elsewhere in the New Testament Christian slaveholders are given commands of their own, such as the following: “Masters, give unto *your* servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven” (Colossians 4:1). But a verse such as Colossians 4:1 raises the question: Exactly what constitutes “just and equal” treatment as meted out by a Christian slaveholder? As Brownlow’s gloss on the 1 Peter passage indicates, the defenders of slavery could cross-reference biblical injunctions in order to justify the beating of slaves. Moreover, 1 Peter states that those in servitude are obligated to obey not only those Christian masters who obey apostolic commands, but also the “froward,” or harsh<sup>59</sup> master who might be inclined to administer unjust punishment. These biblical passages and the anti-abolitionist commentary thereon take on a chilling quality when read alongside the many testimonies of African-Americans who witnessed, or themselves endured, some of the atrocities committed against slaves in the United States. But the position of anti-abolitionists like Stringfellow appears to be that “the *glory of the gospel*” takes precedence over earthly concerns for individual rights or comforts. Anti-abolitionists again use their rhetoric to position themselves on the side of the Great Commission, and claim that disobedient slaves and their abolitionist accomplices stand in opposition to that foundational Christian responsibility.

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<sup>59</sup> “Harsh” is the translation used in the New Revised Standard Version.

***Romans 1:26-27 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul offers the following analysis of pagan idolatry: “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible men, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things” (vv. 22, 23). According to Paul, such idolatrous practices resulted in a sort of punishment from the Christian deity: “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the creator, who is blessed for ever” (vv. 24, 25). Having established this context, Paul continues with a passage that has become critical to anti-gay biblical interpretation:

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. (vv. 26, 27)

For anti-gay readers, here is the first “proof” that the Old Testament injunctions against homosexual acts are reaffirmed in the Christian dispensation. Moreover, whereas the rules in Leviticus only condemn male homosexual acts, the letter to the Romans refers to both male and female same-sex activity.

Anti-gay readers have, in their commentaries upon these verses, focused on two things in particular: the passage’s context of idolatry, and the notion of same-sex activity being “against nature.” With regard to the former issue, Jeffrey Satinover sees Paul’s words as “making clear the link between idolatry and unconstrained sexuality”; he notes that the pagan idols to whom

Paul refers “were but the multicultural variants of the same Baal and Astarte and Molech against whose worship the earlier Israelite prophets had similarly cried out” (244). F. LaGard Smith argues, on the other hand, that “here Paul seems not to be thinking specifically of wooden idols or stone gods of some kind—only the fact that homosexual conduct, like all other sin, *dethrones God* (the Creator) and *enthrones man* (the creature)” (129). Smith’s approach is significant; rather than attach idolatry to a discussion of specific ancient deities, as does Satinover, he instead describes homosexual activity as a form of idolatry. This distinction aside, both Smith and Satinover see Paul’s words as unquestionably condemnatory of homosexuality. In this fundamental assessment they are joined by Timothy J. Dailey, who declares that in Romans 1 Paul “condemns homosexual behavior with no qualifications and no exceptions whatsoever” (10).

The second critical issue derived by anti-gay readers from this passage—the concept of homosexuality as being “against nature”—marks a site where anti-gay activists attempt to marry science and theology. Joe Dallas, for example, declares that when Paul “refers to ‘men’ and ‘women’ in these verses, he chooses the Greek words that most emphasize biology [. . .]. He is saying, in other words, that homosexuality is *biologically* unnatural—not just unnatural to *heterosexuals*, but unnatural to *anyone*” (194). Adding to this “against nature” theme, anti-gay writer Ben Rast makes the following appeal to physiology:

However, it’s not hard to figure out that homosexuality is decidedly unnatural.

My wife and I used to have a couple of pendant necklaces. Each of us had half of a pendant on our necklace. When we put our two halves together, the zigzag pattern meshed together flawlessly to create a single, whole pendant (which, by the way, bore the words of Genesis 2:24). God made men and women different,

both emotionally and physically. Physically, we were created to fit together anatomically much like our pendant. Our parts just match up! Remember the child's game of matching the round peg into the round hole, the square peg into the square hole, etc.? The homosexual is trying to force two pegs together, in blatant disregard for God's natural design!

Rast goes on to quote the relevant verses from Romans 1. Both his and Dallas' commentary indicates the mileage which anti-gay biblical interpreters are able to get out of Romans 1.

***1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 and 1 Timothy 1:9, 10 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul presents a catalogue of sinners who are denied salvation: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10). A similar list is also given in the first letter to Timothy, in which Paul states that "the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars" (1 Timothy 1:9, 10). With regard to the debate within Christendom over homosexuality, the critical words in these passages are those rendered in the King James Version as "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind" (or "them that defile themselves with mankind"). In New Testament Greek these

terms are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.<sup>60</sup> The translation of these terms, as well as the interpretation of their significance for contemporary believers, has been a hot topic of debate within Christendom for decades. For anti-gay Christians who employ an absolutist hermeneutic, however, there is no question that these verses condemn homosexuality universally. William Dannemeyer, after quoting 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 10 (together with above-mentioned passages from Leviticus and Romans), writes the following: “These statements are fairly explicit, and there are others that are implicit denunciations of the practice of homosexuality” (93).

### ***Jude v. 7 (The Anti-Gay Bible)***

The final anti-gay prooftext comes from the letter attributed to the apostle Jude. The author warns his audience that “Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (v. 7). The reference to “strange flesh” leads to some interesting questions—is it an allusion to homosexuality, as in the homosexual gang rape attempted in Genesis 19? Or, if the verse is a specific reference to that narrative, does the term “strange flesh” signify the difference between the angelic bodies of Lot’s guests and the human bodies of the would-be rapists? Or, does this verse refer to some other offense, one not explicitly recorded in the Hebrew Bible? For anti-gay interpreters, such an inquiry is washed away by the force of their own certitude. Ankerberg and Weldon, for example, declare, “In Jude 7 it is specifically stated that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was both a lesson and a divine

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<sup>60</sup> A comprehensive look at these two terms as they are used in the New Testament is given by John Boswell in his groundbreaking *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*; specifically, in appendix I of the book, “Lexicography and Saint Paul” (335-53).

warning to all men regarding homosexuality.” Thus does this odd verse become the final key element of the anti-gay Bible.

### **THE SLAVEMASTER’S BIBLE AND THE ANTI-GAY BIBLE: A REFLECTION**

In the 1851 polemic *A Defence of Southern Slavery*, an author identified only as “A Southern Clergyman” makes the following bold declaration: “[L]et the advocates of slavery humbly rejoice in finding the God of the Bible with them, and that truth is mighty and must prevail” (11). More than a century and a half later, such claims have been left in the trash bins of history. But, although the question as to whether slavery is justified by the Bible may seem irrelevant to twenty-first century Americans, the controversy over the Bible and homosexuality rages hotly throughout the nation. And, as I assert in this chapter, the great irony is that today’s anti-gay interpreters of the Bible are replicating the hermeneutical patterns of the “Southern Clergyman” and his discredited peers.

Many may find both the Slavemaster’s Bible and the Anti-Gay Bible to be repulsive creations. They are cultural constructs which have much in common when analyzed from a structural perspective. They also have in common the fact that neither creature is harmlessly confined to the pulpit or the seminary; on the contrary, each “Bible” has a profound impact on the lives of real people. The Slavemaster’s Bible provided both moral and political cover for some of the most atrocious human rights violations ever perpetrated on American soil.<sup>61</sup> Today, the Anti-Gay Bible similarly provides moral and legal cover to those who seek to deny to gay

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<sup>61</sup> Some of these atrocities are detailed in anti-abolitionist literature; this topic is touched on in the fourth chapter of this study.



people a wide range of rights: freedom from discrimination in housing, education, and employment; access to the same legal and financial benefits enjoyed by heterosexual married couples; the opportunity to adopt children; and so forth. Consider, for example, the following statement put forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as part of its propaganda offensive against the legalization of same-sex marriage:

There is to be no separation between one's faith and life in either public or private realms. All Catholics should act on their beliefs with a well-formed conscience based on Sacred Scripture and Tradition. They should be a community of conscience within society. By their voice and their vote, they should contribute to society's welfare and test its public life by the standards of right reason and Gospel truth [ . . . ]. Participation in the political process is a moral obligation. This is particularly urgent in light of the need to defend marriage and to oppose the legalization of same-sex unions as marriage.

The Conference's references to "Sacred Scripture" and "Gospel truth" could be read as references to the Anti-Gay Bible as it is employed by the Catholic hierarchy. Significantly, the bishops assert that imposing the Anti-Gay Bible on America through the political process is a "moral obligation" for faithful Catholics.

The fight against gay rights often unites those on the opposite sides of the Catholic/Protestant divide. Two Protestant evangelists who have very much stood in solidarity with the Catholic hierarchy on this issue are Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. They have consistently invoked the Anti-Gay Bible in the course of their decades-long crusade against gay rights. Although Falwell was, on the whole, a masterful manipulator of rhetoric in pursuit of his goals, he made a notable public misstep shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Two days after this national tragedy Falwell was interviewed on the television program *The 700 Club* by its host, Robertson. Reflecting on the attacks Falwell launched into a diatribe in which he condemned “the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen.’” Robertson responded, “Well, I totally concur.”<sup>62</sup> Following a public outcry over these statements Falwell issued a public apology.

Carter Heyward, an openly lesbian Episcopal priest and theologian, reflected on Falwell’s notorious post-9/11 comment in her 2002 book *God in the Balance*:

Especially chilling at this moment is the realization that the Falwell-Robertson version of Christianity is a very close cousin to the theology of those who bombed the World Trade Center and Pentagon with hijacked commercial airliners. What we witnessed in horror as the planes hit their targets, taking with them thousands of our brothers and sisters, was the dramatization of a theology of fear, hatred, and narrow-minded absolutism in which its proponents assumed that they, and they alone, could speak for God and indeed represent God in the wiping out of his enemies. Whether a perversion of Islam (as it seems to have been in this case) or, in other instances, a perversion of Judaism or Christianity, this wretched theology of judgment and violence is a primary source of evil among us. In the name of God, we must reject it. (68)

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<sup>62</sup> The controversy over Falwell’s remark is covered by CNN in the online article “Falwell apologizes to gays, feminists, lesbians.” A transcript of the *700 Club* interview with Falwell is available online on the left-leaning Common Dreams website.

Is Heyward's comparison of "Falwell-Robertson" Christianity to the Islam of the 9/11 hijackers fair? That question lies, perhaps, beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, Heyward's assertion that each is a "theology of fear, hatred, and narrow-minded absolutism" is not only a valid criticism, but also applicable to the anti-abolitionist Christians of the pre-Civil War era. As their own written testaments show, many of these anti-abolitionist activists manifested an intense fear of the pre-Christianized, pre-"civilized" African, as well as a fear of what the abolitionist agenda could do to the United States. And some of the extreme invective launched against the abolitionists does indeed reek of raw hatred. This same fear and hatred, as well as the absolutist notion that only they possess the keys to authentic biblical interpretation, also seems evident throughout the writings and public statements of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the many other Christian Right figures who have perpetuated anti-gay politics. The Anti-Gay Bible represents a powerful component of this political movement; whether or not it will one day share a place on the trash pile next to the Slavemaster's Bible remains an open question.

#### **4.0 CHAPTER THREE: THE LIBERATIONISTS' BIBLE**

The contemporary practitioners of anti-gay biblical hermeneutics, like the practitioners of anti-abolitionist hermeneutics a century ago, have demonstrated a dogged commitment to their political goals. In each case, the goal has been to preserve a system in which the legal rights and social freedoms of a distinct group of Americans (African-American slaves on one hand, gay people on the other) are restricted. But neither the anti-abolitionists nor the anti-gay activists have practiced their rhetorical strategies and reading practices in a vacuum. In each case, a contrary movement has done battle on the very ground of the biblical text. Because each of these parallel movements has been committed to increasing, rather than restricting, the freedoms of a marginalized group, I will collectively refer to them as liberationist movements.

In the previous chapter I catalogued masses of proof-texts that the anti-abolitionist and anti-gay movements—movements which might be collectively termed reactionary movements—respectively used in the construction of their arguments. Undergirding these movements' uses of these proof-texts have been two core beliefs: first, that the Bible is an infallible and final authority; and second, that this authoritative text speaks with a consistent and unambiguous voice. This observation leads to a logical question: is there a difference in the approaches taken to the Bible between, on one hand, the reactionary movements, and on the other hand, their liberationist opponents? To tease out the question further—do the liberationist movements at

hand simply valorize biblical authority, as do the reactionary movements, and merely substitute their own cherry-picked crop of proof-texts?

An extensive review of both abolitionist and pro-gay literature has led me to conclude that the answer to both questions is “no.” Contemporary pro-gay literature includes a large number of authors who—as did so many abolitionist writers—draw on the Bible as a source of inspiration, as a cultural touchstone, or both. While neither of these liberationist camps is monolithic in its writers’ approaches to the Bible, I have observed seven general ways in which these camps both parallel each other and break sharply with reactionary readers of the Bible:

- (1) Both abolitionists and pro-gay writers often appeal to a “higher law” which both informs and transcends the essentially “frozen” text of the Bible itself; this reading strategy breaks with the absolutist/reactionary notion that the Bible is a final and unambiguous authority.
- (2) Writers from both groups draw attention to the ways in which appeals to the Bible are used to justify human rights abuses.
- (3) Writers from both groups sometimes challenge the notion of a discrete and closed canon of sacred writings.
- (4) Writers from both groups often engage in a practice of resistant reading, by which they question and even challenge the apparent assumptions and cultural norms of the biblical authors.
- (5) Writers from both groups often explore the polyvocality of biblical texts, and in doing so challenge the absolutist/reactionary notion of a Bible that is always internally consistent.

- (6) Writers from both groups often read and apply biblical texts in a metaphoric mode, thus contrasting with the literalistic and proscriptive hermeneutics of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay voices.
- (7) And finally, writers from both groups give serious attention to, and even prefer, the witness of marginalized persons over the witness of socially and politically privileged persons.

In this chapter I will examine each of these seven points of commonality between abolitionist and pro-gay approaches to the Bible. After moving through each common point, I will present a parallel “case study” of a significant milestone of abolitionist literature paired with a contemporary pro-gay text.

### **“WHOSE TABLETS IN THE HEART ARE SET”: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE HIGHER LAW**

As noted in Chapter Three of this dissertation, both anti-abolitionist and anti-gay writers have been heavily invested in the concept of the Bible as a book of laws. Certainly, many of the favorite proof-texts of both camps are drawn from the most explicitly legalistic of the biblical books (namely, Exodus through Deuteronomy, which encompass Mosaic law). Each group also uses the proscriptive declarations found in the New Testament as a sort of reiteration of selected Mosaic laws. Those who favor the abolition of slavery, and later, gay civil rights, are thus met with the challenge: How dare you defy the law of God?

The liberationist response to this question often points to the notion of a “higher law”—a greater good which transcends the literal text of the Bible. Interestingly, one could point to the

biblical text itself for a precedent for such thinking. In the book of Isaiah, a weary Yahweh chastises a people who legalistically observe Mosaic ceremonial commandments while neglecting deeper issues of compassion and social justice:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD; I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats [. . .]. Bring me no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me [. . .]. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear *them*. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11, 13-17)

A comparable line of thought may be also found in the New Testament. For example, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus encounters a man with a disabled hand on the Sabbath. The Jewish scribes and Pharisees, eager to accuse Jesus of violating the Torah's injunction against working on the Sabbath, watch closely to see if Jesus might miraculously heal the man (Luke 6: 6, 7). Aware of the legalistic trap before him, Jesus nonetheless heals the man. But before doing so he chides his audience: "I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy *it*?" (Luke 6:9). Both the authors of Isaiah and Luke place the relief of suffering fellow humans above certain scriptural commands and prohibitions; it is this theme that abolitionist writers would also take up in their polemics.

Abolitionist Abram Pryne took on the issues of biblical authority and human suffering while responding to an opponent in a debate: “The gentleman on the other side tells us that Jesus never denounced slavery. Has he not read the words, ‘Undo the heavy burdens?’ A crushing burden is laid on the back of the poor slave at birth, which he carries all the days of his life, until he sinks under it into his grave” (Brownlow and Pryne 127). By citing Isaiah 58:6 in his statement, Pryne initially may appear to be merely aping the proof-texting strategy of the typical anti-abolitionist.<sup>63</sup> But he quickly turns from Isaiah to the reality of the plight of nineteenth-century slaves. Isaiah’s words are merely a door opener; the ultimate emphasis in Pryne’s statement is on the unjust burden born by the “poor slave.”

Like Pryne, other abolitionists also focused on the suffering of human beings under slavery. For example, in her seminal novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Harriet Beecher Stowe frequently employed the device of having two characters argue over what is the biblically correct response to slavery and to abolitionism. One of the most telling of these fictional exchanges occurs between a fugitive slave named George and a white man named Wilson:

“Why, George, no—no—it won’t do; this way of talking is wicked—unscriptural. George, you’ve got a hard master—in fact, he is—well he conducts himself reprehensibly—I can’t pretend to defend him. But you know how the angel commanded Hagar to return to her mistress, and submit herself under her hand; and the apostle sent back Onesimus to his master.”

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<sup>63</sup> In full, the verse reads, “*Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?*”



While acknowledging the abusiveness of George's master, Wilson nonetheless "whacks" the fugitive with allusions from both testaments in his chastisement. But George is not intimidated by the appeal to biblical authority. Retorting "'Don't quote Bible at me in that way, Mr. Wilson,'" he further elaborates, "'to quote Bible to a fellow in my circumstances is enough to make him give it up altogether. I appeal to God Almighty;—I'm willing to go with the case to Him, and ask Him if I do wrong to seek my freedom'" (107-08). Through her fictional mouthpiece Stowe thus posits that two things may trump a literalistic reading of Scripture: first, the slave's actual lived experience of oppression; and second, the slave's prerogative to make a direct appeal to the divine. Another abolitionist activist who addressed this issue of oppression was J. Blanchard:

Now the question is, whether Humanity can look to Christianity and find protection? Whether the oppressed can flee to the sanctuary of the Gospel of Christ and find a refuge there—or whether religion affords no protection to human rights? In other words, whether the religion we profess is a humane or inhumane religion? (Blanchard and Rice 12)

Blanchard elevates the concept of "human rights" as a higher good by which religion is actually evaluated; in this argument he subverts the biblicentric rhetoric so prevalent in anti-abolitionist literature.

Poetry was also a vehicle by which abolitionist writers explored the concept of human rights and imagined a greater good that transcended the strict letter of biblical law. In her 1856 poem "Be Active," for example, Frances E.W. Harper<sup>64</sup> declares,

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<sup>64</sup> During the period to which this poem is dated, Harper served as a lecturer for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society (Graham xxxvii).

Men of every clime and nation  
Every faith and sect and creed,  
Lay aside your idle jangling,  
Come and staunch the wounds that bleed. (203)

The imperative to relieve human suffering trumps “idle jangling” amongst sects; as for Blanchard, religion is thus judged in light of human rights. Another abolitionist poet who held religion to a higher standard was John Greenleaf Whittier. His 1844 poem “The Sentence of John L. Brown” offers a particularly pointed criticism of what Whittier saw as illegitimate appeals to the Bible:

Still let a mousing priesthood ply  
Their garbled text and gloss of sin,  
And make the lettered scroll deny  
Its living soul within:  
. . . . .  
But ye who own that Higher Law  
Whose tablets in the heart are set,  
Speak out in words of power and awe  
That God is living yet! (92)

Whittier’s explicit appeal to a “Higher Law” was a direct challenge to the proof-texting strategies employed by so many anti-abolitionists. Whittier’s philosophy echoes that expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his seminal 1838 address at Harvard Divinity School; Emerson extolled “the Moral Nature, that Law of Laws, whose revelations introduce greatness,—yea, God himself, into the open soul” (100). For the abolitionists, this “Law of Laws,” this “Higher Law,”

superseded such commands as “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh” (Ephesians 6:5).

Anti-abolitionists mocked such appeals to a “Higher Law” which elevated human rights and decried human suffering. Bryan Tyson, for example, in an undated pamphlet, acknowledges this current in abolitionist thought: “Again—it is argued by some that liberty is an inherent right; that we therefore have no right to deprive any people of their liberty, not even if their condition be bettered thereby” (33). Tyson then presents as a truism that horses enjoy better lives as domesticated animals than they would if left to fend for themselves in the wild. He completes his analogy: “Even so with the negro. Though he does not need the fostering care of the white man to the same extent that the horse does, yet it is evident that he does to a certain degree, from the fact that he thrives better with it than without it” (33, 34). For Tyson, that very concept of human rights is illegitimate in the context of African-Americans, whom he compares to domestic quadrupeds. Attacking the concept of the “Higher Law” even more directly is Harrison Berry, in an 1861 polemic: “I shall have to lay before you the inconsistency of the Abolition cause. They pretend to be governed by the Higher Law principle, which, they say, teaches the inestimable right guaranteed to all men, to govern themselves nationally, domestically, and personally” (31). Berry uses a classic proof-texting strategy to try to demolish this core Abolitionist concept. Citing the story of Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:24, 25), Berry declares, “Certainly, this must be another departure from the original Higher Law claims, for Ham was as free born as Shem and Japheth, yet we see that Shem and Japheth were to dwell together, and poor Ham had to serve them” (32). Berry continues his rhetorical assault by bringing in the story of Joshua’s enslavement of the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:17-27):

We read in the ninth chapter of Joshua, that when the Israelites found that they were deceived by the men of Gibeon, they were sore displeased, but, in consequence of their oaths, they could not slay them as they had done others. But mark the sequel: they were constituted perpetual servants to the children of Israel as hewers of wood and drawers of water. So we see [. . .] that the claim to the Higher Law will not do; and men [. . .] holding forth such doctrines to the ignorant classes of the United States, are guilty of blaspheming against God and the Constitution, and are, most emphatically, contaminated with dangerous deceit.

(32)

Thus is folded into a classic proof-text maneuver one of the anti-abolitionists' overarching arguments: that abolitionism is inherently blasphemous. Despite the attacks of writers like Tyson and Berry, however, the appeal to human rights, human compassion, and the "Higher Law" remained one of the most potent and enduring currents in abolitionist thought.

Contemporary defenders of gay rights have similarly looked to a higher law as they have grappled with Bible-based anti-gay rhetoric. As did the abolitionists of a previous century, Maurine C. Waun calls for a Christianity that is grounded in compassion. Commenting on Christendom's seemingly endless debates over homosexuality, she writes: "We continue to spend our time debating about sin and Christian teaching and scriptural proofs for this and that, but meanwhile we are missing the chance of a lifetime to move beyond all that and engage hurting persons in truly meaningful ministry" (111). Her words echo Frances E.W. Harper's call to lay aside "idle jangling" in favor of a movement to "staunch the wounds that bleed." Indeed, Waun acknowledges the complicity of Christendom in causing suffering: "The Judeo-Christian ethic has had a substantial causative responsibility for the way that homosexuals and other non-

heterosexual persons are oppressed and treated in our society” (123). Ken Stone takes Waun’s *j’accuse* a step further, honing in on the Bible’s role in this oppression; in his study *Practicing Safer Texts*, Stone observes that “even if biblical interpretation can be (like food) nourishing and generative of life, so also can it be (again like food) dangerous and productive of death” (12).

In the practice of biblical interpretation, how does one avoid generating the deadly poisons of which Stone warns? Gay clergyman Robert Williams offers the following advice: “We must supplement what we can ‘know’ through historic and scientific methods with what we ‘know’ from our own religious experience, from the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking within our own souls” (*Just As I Am* 55, 56). Like past generations of abolitionists, Williams appears to be pointing towards a “Higher Law” which transcends literal readings of proscriptive biblical verses. Another gay-friendly writer, Kenneth Cauthen, sees in the Bible a potentially fertile field for Stone’s nourishing “food”: “When we discover what is highest and best in it, the Bible can be read in ways that lead to repentance, transformation, and justice for the oppressed” (13). Once again, the idea of justice is held up as a greater good.

Stone, Williams, and Cauthen touch on some of the strongest currents in contemporary pro-gay literature as they examine the nexus of social justice and biblical interpretation. However, the most provocative insights on this nexus probably come from the writings of lesbian theologian Carter Heyward. She opens up the discussion beyond an explicitly Christian rubric in her 1989 study *Touching Our Strength*:

Like the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Torah, Koran, and scriptures of other major patriarchal religious traditions, the bible can be a resource for liberation if it inspires us to envision and embody justice and to resist domination,

subordination, violence, and greed. The bible is not a word of God when it is used to justify structures and dynamics of unjust power relations. (81)

Heyward's deliberate use of the lowercase "b" in "bible" seems to satirize the religious chauvinism that often seems to mark Christian writing. Beyond that, her assertion that at times the Bible is *not* a "word of God" is a bold challenge to the bibliocentrism characteristic of so many anti-gay Christian polemics. Is there a link between Heyward's bold challenge and the Abolitionist heritage? Consider John Greenleaf Whittier's above-cited warning that the Bible may be reduced to a "garbled text and gloss of sin" by those who seek in its pages justification for the enslavement of their fellow human beings. Heyward's may merely be seen as contemporary phrasing for the same admonition. Heyward continues: "No text is sacred if it is used to abuse, violate, or trivialize human and other earthcreatures. The Christian bible is holy only insofar as we who read, study, preach, or teach it do so in a spirit of collaborative, critical inquiry steeped in collective struggle for radical mutuality between and among us all on the earth" (*Touching* 82, 83). Heyward's "collaborative, critical inquiry" of the biblical text takes into account the perspectives of the marginalized, just as abolitionist writers considered the perspective of the suffering slave in their own grapplings with the Bible.

Using poetic imagery, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote that the "tablets" of the Higher Law are set in the human heart. Whittier's word choice echoes the powerful image of the tablets upon which the biblical law of Moses is written: "And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tablets of the testimony *were* in his hand: the tables *were* written on both their sides; on the one side and the other *were* they written. And the tables *were* the work of God, and the writing *was* the writing of God, graven upon the tables" (Exodus 32:15, 16). Both anti-abolitionist and anti-gay writers have quoted proof-texts as if these verses were, like the text

on Moses' tablets, literally "written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18). For such reactionary writers the Bible is authoritative and inerrant—its commands binding, its pronouncements unambiguous and unquestionable. Abolitionist writers like Whittier challenged this concept of a rigid, inflexible Bible. They wrote of a higher law which transcended the literal text of the Bible—a higher law which is informed by the real experience of human suffering, and which elevates human rights as a greater good. Contemporary gay-friendly readers of the Bible have similarly gravitated towards a higher law as they have sought to place some of the more difficult biblical passages into a meaningful context. Whittier wrote of this higher law being found in the human heart; it might also be said that this higher law is accessed when one is open to the testimony of those who actually suffer as a result of reactionary biblical interpretation. Or, in other words, this higher law springs from the spirit of "radical mutuality" championed by Carter Heyward. In their quest for such a more nuanced and humane biblical hermeneutics, contemporary gay-friendly theologians are reading in the same tradition as Whittier, Stowe, and the other enduring voices of abolitionism.

**"[. . .] MORE CRUEL AND HATEFUL IN ALL HIS WAYS":**

#### **REACTIONARY HERMENEUTICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE**

The inverse of Carter Heyward's liberatory hermeneutics of "radical mutuality" is a hermeneutical model that rejects the idealism of a "higher law"; it is a model that hones in on the Bible's harshest admonitions and shackles them to members of marginalized communities. While championing their own approach to the Bible, both abolitionists and gay rights advocates have drawn attention to the practical ways in which the hermeneutics of their ideological

opponents result in real harm to human beings. This particular strand within abolitionist rhetoric is perhaps no more vividly exemplified than in Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiographical narrative. Writing of his life as a former slave, Douglass offers insights into the relationships between the Bible, the institutional church, and slavery. Douglass recalls the conversion of his then-owner, Captain Auld, to Christianity at an 1832 Methodist "Camp Meeting." The younger Douglass nurtures a hope that this religious transformation might inspire Auld to emancipate his slaves, or, at the very least, "make him more kind and humane." Douglass is disappointed on both counts. In fact, Auld emerges from the conversion experience "more cruel and hateful in all his ways." Douglass explains: "Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty" (97). Douglass offers a sickening example of such religion-supported cruelty: "I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—'He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes'" (98-99). Captain Auld thus not only finds in Christianity an inspiration for his cruelty, but he can go to a specific proof-text (in this case, Luke 12:47) in order to justify a particular act of anti-slave violence. Harriet Jacobs observes a similar influence of institutional Christianity on her owner: "When I was told that Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal church, I was very much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant" (74). In light of such slave testimony, the following declaration of African-American abolitionist David Walker is unsurprising: "Indeed, the way in which religion was and is conducted by the Europeans and their descendants, one might believe it was a plan



fabricated by themselves and the *devils* to oppress us” (35). Although Douglass, Jacobs, and Walker all professed belief in the Christian gospel, they nonetheless acknowledged that much of institutional Christianity in the United States—particularly in its use of the Bible—had become a buttress for the cruelest abuses against enslaved Americans.

Abolitionist writers of fiction and poetry seconded the critique of institutional Christianity offered in the biographies of former slaves like Douglass and Jacobs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, creates, in her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a fictional slavemaster comparable in manner and method to Douglass’ Captain Auld. Consider the words with which Stowe’s Simon Legree taunts his slave Tom after Tom refuses to flog a fellow slave:

“Well, here’s a pious dog at last let down among us sinners!—a saint, a gentleman, and no less, to talk to us sinners about our sins! Powerful holy critter, he must be! Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious,—don’t you never hear, out of your Bible, ‘Servants, obey yer masters’? Ain’t I yer master? Didn’t I pay twelve hundred dollars cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? Ain’t yer mine, now, body and soul?” he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot; “tell me!” (355)

Like Captain Auld, Legree quotes a New Testament verse—in this case, the pro-slavery mainstay Ephesians 6:5—in order to justify anti-slave violence. Abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier used poetry as a tool by which to critique such an approach to the Bible. Exemplary of Whittier’s work is “Lines from a Letter to a Young Clerical Friend,” a poem written in the format of a prayer:

For lying lips Thy blessing seek,  
And hands of blood are raised to Thee,

And on Thy children, crushed and weak,  
The oppressor plants his kneeling knee.  
Let then, O God! Thy servant dare  
Thy truth in all its power to tell  
Unmask the priestly thieves, and tear  
The Bible from the grasp of hell! (122)

Whittier's vision of a the Bible used to justify oppression, and thereby trapped in the "grasp of hell" is a startling contrast to the fetish-like language used by anti-abolitionists to describe the Bible. Like Stowe and Douglass, Whittier reminds his audience that the Bible is but a tool—a tool that may be used by cruel men for unjust purposes. Whittier takes up this theme again, using a more sarcastically satiric tone, in his poem "The Sentence of John L. Brown":

Ho! thou who seekest late and long  
A License from the Holy Book  
For brutal lust and fiendish wrong,  
Man of the Pulpit, look!  
. . . . .  
Search out for slavery's hour of need  
Some fitting text of sacred writ;  
Give heaven the credit of a deed  
Which shames the nether pit. (91)

In this poem Whittier specifically critiques the pro-slavery rhetorical strategy of proof-texting. According to the poet, the defenders of slavery approach the Bible with an agenda that is both

predetermined and morally reprehensible, and simply seek out verses by which to justify that agenda.

The practitioners of the hermeneutics so critiqued by Whittier and Stowe did not let such criticism go unchallenged. Bryan Tyson, for example, specifically addresses the charges of injustice and inhumanity leveled at the defenders of slavery: “Many things take place in this world that may not appear just and right unto us, but at the same time, God may perhaps have some object in view not known to us” (7). In other words, the cruelties and loss of liberty inflicted upon the enslaved may be part of some greater divine plan. Tyson continues with a biblical example: “Thus, when Saul was commanded to go and smite the Amalekites, he was commanded to smite every man, woman, and child. Even the innocent suckling that had of itself no guile, was doomed to death.”<sup>65</sup> The implication is that if God could so command the faithful

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<sup>65</sup> Tyson 7. The narrative cited is found in 1 Samuel 15. The prophet Samuel delivers Yahweh’s genocidal command to Saul: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (v. 3). This command is reiterated later in the narrative (v. 18). Thus not only are, as Tyson notes, innocent children targeted for death, but so too are the Amalekite livestock. It is worth considering some contemporary evangelical/fundamentalist reactions to this verse. The editors of *The NIV Study Bible* gloss verse 3 thus: “Saul is given an opportunity as king to demonstrate his allegiance to the Lord by obedience in this assigned task” (393 n. 15:3). The issue of genocide is thus, for these editors, irrelevant in the face of the overriding issue: strict obedience to a divine command. The authors of the commentary *Hard Sayings of the Bible* gloss verse 18, asking the rhetorical question, “How could God approve of blanket destruction, of the genocide of an entire group of people?” Their answer to their own question is chilling. After noting the corruption of the Amalekite people, they write: “Just as surgeons do not hesitate to amputate a gangrenous limb, even if they cannot help cutting off some healthy flesh, so God must do the same. This is not doing evil that good may come; it is removing the cancer that

to commit genocide, then surely it is not so outrageous for that same God to demand the obedience of slaves to their masters. Tyson does not completely dismiss the plight of abused slaves. In such a case where a slave is “harshly treated” by “a hard taskmaster,” Tyson makes the following recommendation: “In this case let him raise his petition to Christ, who is no respecter of persons, and justice will eventually be done” (21). However, Tyson adds that such an abused slave should not expect such “justice” in his earthly lifetime: “God, in His infinite wisdom, did not intend that justice should be meted out in this world [. . .]. The hard taskmaster will, in a coming day, stand at the bar of God, there to be judged according to deeds done in the body, and there will be shown no respect of persons” (22). Thus, in Tyson’s worldview, the slave must endure all earthly abuse with obedience, and look forward only to justice in the Christian afterlife. In light of such anti-abolitionist theological musings, Frederick Douglass’ pointed rhetoric is made more poignant:

I assert unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard

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could infect all of society and eventually the remaining good” (Kaiser et. al. 206-07). In this analogy innocent children are likened to the healthy flesh that must be sacrificed in the removal of a diseased limb; thus do the authors find a way to justify biblical genocide. Unsurprisingly, both the contributors to *The NIV Study Bible* and the authors of *Hard Sayings* adopt an anti-gay posture in their respective glosses on Romans 1:26, indicating that anti-gay thought may make a logical pairing with pro-genocide rhetoric.

being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me.  
(117)

Douglass' words of condemnation are echoed by many abolitionists, including former slaves like himself, who demonstrate how pro-slavery biblical hermeneutics directly lead to the physical and psychological abuse of enslaved human beings.

A parallel theme has been taken up by contemporary gay-friendly writers. Openly gay theologian J. Michael Clark, for example, writes that "the Bible has been used, over and over again, as a tool of oppression and even terrorism, as the ideological justification not only for excluding gay men and lesbians, but also for blaming the victim in the AIDS health crisis and for engaging in acts of antigay/antilesbian violence" (10). Carter Heyward carries Clark's theme further by reflecting on a particular case: the murder of Charlie Howard, a twenty-three year old gay man who drowned after being thrown off a bridge by three teen-age males in Bangor, Maine on July 7, 1984.<sup>66</sup> In *Touching Out Strength*, Heyward writes, "Charlie Howard was killed because all-American kids are taught by church, synagogue, and state to fear and hate fags. The three young men who killed Charlie Howard stand, in a representative sense, for the prevailing sexual and moral ethos of our mainstream religions and our society" (51).

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<sup>66</sup> Heyward includes the historical information on the Charlie Howard murder in *Touching Our Strength* (169 n. 4). In 2004 a conference entitled "Charlie Howard 20 Years Later: How Far Has Maine Come?" was held under the sponsorship of the University of Southern Maine's Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity and Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence; among those addressing the attendees was Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe (Kemoklidze). In 2006, the *Bangor Daily News* reported that the Charles O. Howard Memorial Foundation and the Bangor city commission on cultural development were nearing agreement on the erection of a monument in Howard's memory ("Hate crime memorial planned").

Novelist Bette Greene shared theologian Heyward's concern over the nexus of institutional religion and anti-gay violence. In her 1991 novel *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, Greene tells the story of an anti-gay murder that is very reminiscent of the Charlie Howard slaying. The murder of the title character is foreshadowed in a homophobic rant by Andy Harris, one of Greene's other characters: "The answer is already there in the Bible! In Romans, where it as plain as day says: 'The wages of sin are death.' If I were president, first thing I'd do is to make death for homosexuality the law.'" Andy even suggests a mode of execution: "Treat queers the same way we treat murderers, let them all fry to a frizzle in the electric chair" (26). When Andy's position is challenged by another character, he reaches back into the Bible for more rhetorical ammunition with which to condemn gays:

"They commit the sin of sodomy, and that's as bad as you can get. You know, you don't have to believe me, you can read all about it in the Bible. The Bible calls it an abomination—an *a-bom-in-a-tion*." He emphatically separated and then sounded out each syllable, just in case she didn't understand the word the first time around [ . . . ]. Andy socked his fist into an open palm. "It says in Leviticus that if a man lies with a man that's an abomination and both men will be put to death!" (27)

Andy's exaggerated pronunciation of the word "abomination" reflects the almost fetishistic attention which anti-gay Christians lavish on the biblical passages traditionally used in anti-gay theology.<sup>67</sup> Andy's biblical hermeneutics lead to verbal harassment of the novel's title character,

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<sup>67</sup> It is also significant that Greene chose Leviticus 20:13 as the key verse around which Andy builds his anti-gay argument. In his 1995 book *Stranger at the Gate*, gay Christian activist

and ultimately to physical violence; Greene's novel thus mirrors Frederick Douglass' account of anti-abolitionist biblical interpretation being accompanied by anti-slave violence.

Although a work of fiction, *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* reflects the author's research into real incidents of anti-gay violence. While preparing to write the novel Greene interviewed more than 400 young men who had been jailed for various acts of anti-gay violence (Gomes 146). Greene reflected on that odyssey in a 1994 interview with Lynne Alvine. She noted that she avoided interviewing subjects who stole from their victims in order to focus on attacks that could be considered true hate crimes, rather than crimes for profit. While ferreting out the source of the hatred motivating anti-gay violence, she discovered the following: "Not all the boys were religious, but they had all been affected by religion. They knew it was OK to do violence to gay people because they thought it said so in the Bible." Greene noted that some of her interviewees

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Mel White reports a real-life conversation, also focused on this biblical verse, which eerily echoes the exchange between Greene's fictional characters:

On a radio talk in Seattle, I debated the Presbyterian pastor of a large fundamentalist church in the suburbs.

"Have you ever read Leviticus 20?" he asked rather smugly.

"Yes," I answered. "What does that passage mean to you?"

"It means," he replied firmly, "that you should be killed."

The familiar Old Testament clobber passage had been misused regularly by [Pat] Robertson, [Jerry] Falwell, and other "selective literalists" to condemn homosexuality, but this Presbyterian literalist was going all the way.

"Who should do the killing," I asked, "you church folk?"

"No," he replied as quickly, "that is the civil authority's job." Then, after a brief pause, he added, "That's why we need to get more good men of God elected into government" (335).

quoted both their local ministers and the Bible in order to justify anti-gay violence. She concluded:

Homophobia is endemic in America. The air we breathe is filled with homophobia. A great amount of it is coming from fundamental Christianity. I've gone to the churches of the young men who were the victimizers. On the tube I see the ever-grinning Pat Robertson. I watch the Trinity Network and the Eternal Word Network. What spews forth is a river of hate. Nobody can be more in error than when they insist that they, and they alone, speak for God.

As Greene's research uncovered, this rhetorical "river of hate" sometimes feeds into an ocean of violence.

Although anti-gay violence may often be the most extreme consequence of anti-gay biblical hermeneutics, it is not the only possible consequence. Gay Christian activist Mel White highlights some of these other consequences in his 1995 book *Stranger at the Gate*; he observes that, in particular, the anti-gay television productions of the Christian Right not only "lead directly and indirectly to violence against gay people," but also "to depression, self-hatred, and suicide for sensitive, young gay and lesbian Christians who are victims of this avalanche of hatred from Christian TV personalities" (315). White's warning is seconded by lesbian scholar Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, who recalls how youthful exposure to anti-gay hermeneutics impacted her life: "Someone did read Romans 1 to me when was thirteen, telling me that if I continued to love women I would prove I was 'without God in my mind' and 'worthy of death.' Being a compliant type and passionately devoted to God, I did try to kill myself, as so many queer teenagers do" ("Reading" 14). Another potentially painful consequence of anti-gay hermeneutics involves its impact on gay and lesbian clergy. Maurine C. Waun recalls the story



of a gay pastor who was removed from his position by officials of his denomination's governing body:

The people he served were devastated [. . .]. [F]or the most part the issue for this church was not John's sexual orientation. Rather, it was the unjust way that both he and the congregation had been treated in the matter, with no regard for the relationship that they had built or the ministry that they had established under John's leadership. In the end, everyone lost. John was forced out of the ordained ministry and the church people were robbed of their beloved pastor against their objections, all because the national denominational police stated that the ordination of homosexuals was not acceptable. (12)

Although Waun protects the anonymity of the clergyman in the above anecdote, there are many gay clergy who have publicly revealed similar struggles with or within their own denominations. One such gay Christian is John McNeill, an openly gay Roman Catholic priest who was expelled from the Jesuit religious order for his refusal to acquiesce to his church's policies surrounding homosexuality. McNeill's insights into the destructive nature of anti-gay religious ideology extend beyond his own struggle with his church. In addition to being a priest, McNeill is also a psychotherapist who has worked with hundreds of gay clients. In *The Church and the Homosexual* McNeill writes, "These [. . .] years of work as a therapist with gay people have put me in intimate contact with the special psychological pain most gay people suffer in our culture and especially in the Catholic Church." He continues: "I became aware that, unless we are dealing with a sadistic God, what is destructive psychologically for so many people has to be bad theology" (235). Elsewhere in *The Church and the Homosexual* McNeill demonstrates the link

between such “bad theology” and anti-gay biblical hermeneutics.<sup>68</sup> Adding to McNeill’s psychological perspective, Gary David Comstock considers the legal ramifications of anti-gay religious ideology. In his 1991 study *Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men*, Comstock shows how biblical passages have been incorporated into anti-gay laws and court rulings in the United States; he considers such legal documents from the colonial era to the 1986 Supreme Court ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which upheld the state of Georgia’s anti-sodomy statute (122, 123). Comstock thus joins McNeill, White, Mollenkott, and Waun in cataloguing the many injustices and sufferings heaped upon lesbians and gay men as a result of the anti-gay hermeneutical model; furthermore, all stand in the tradition of the abolitionist writers who testified of the real life results of oppressor hermeneutics in generations past.

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<sup>68</sup> Consider, for example, McNeill’s commentary on the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, and upon the traditional anti-gay interpretation of this narrative. After speculating that it is the inhospitality of the men of Sodom, rather than the practice of homosexual acts, which may be their actual sin (49), he writes:

If this interpretation of the true sin of Sodom is correct, then we are dealing here with one of the supremely ironic paradoxes of history. For thousands of years in the Christian West homosexuals have been the victim of inhospitable treatment. Condemned by the church, they have been the victim of persecution, torture, and even death. In the name of a mistaken understanding of the crime of Sodom and Gomorrah, the true crime of Sodom and Gomorrah has been and continues to be repeated every day. (50)

## **“HE SPEAKETH, NOT SPAKE”: OPENING THE SCRIPTURAL CANON**

Anti-abolitionist and anti-gay writers in the Protestant Christian tradition typically write of the Bible not only as the authoritative word of God, but as the final written word of God. In absolutist Protestant hermeneutics the canon of sacred scripture closes with the final verses of the book of revelation. In fact, a favorite proof-text for this idea comes from the final chapter of that very book: “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book” (Revelation 22:18). Ironically, a very similar command is found in the five books of Moses: “Ye shall not add to the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deuteronomy 4:2). Nevertheless, the notion that the scriptural canon was closed after Revelation remains a core belief not only of anti-gay Protestant Christians, but of Protestant fundamentalism in general. It is here that anti-gay Protestants differ somewhat from anti-gay Catholics and Mormons. As noted in the first chapter, each of the latter groups accepts a post-biblical authority which is seen as equal to the Bible. For Catholics this second authority is the formal teaching of the Church as embodied in papal bulls and other documents. For Mormons this authority consists of both their own uniquely Mormon scriptures and the teachings of their living apostles and prophets. However, both the Roman Catholic and Mormon churches have a tradition of anti-gay teachings on the part of their respective ecclesiastic hierarchies; thus, the extra-biblical authorities of Roman Catholicism and Mormonism remain on the same anti-gay page as socially conservative Protestants, despite differences on the doctrines surrounding sacred scripture.

In contrast to the contemporary controversy over religion and homosexuality, the abolitionist debate in the United States was largely fought within a Protestant context.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the notion of the biblical canon being closed with the revelations given to the seer of Patmos would have been a cultural commonplace among most parties to the debate. Thus it is curious to find challenges to the closed canon concept appearing in some abolitionist writings. Consider, for example, the fiery polemic pamphlet *David Walker's Appeal*, issued in three editions between 1829 and 1830 (Wiltse vii, xi). Warning the United States about its tolerance for the evil of slavery, Walker writes in a voice reminiscent of that of a biblical prophet: "O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness that your

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<sup>69</sup> John T. McGreevy observes that there was a "general Catholic resistance to abolition." He adds further:

A few American Catholics favored abolition, especially after the beginning of the Civil War, and so did a small number of European Catholics. But these Catholics typically came from the liberal wing of American and European Catholicism, and we can understand their support for the abolition of slavery as only one component of a broader struggle for freedom for and within the church. The most single famous speech by a nineteenth-century Catholic liberal remains the 1863 plea of Charles Montalembert for the separation of church and state. Pius IX, as Peter Steinfels pointed out, responded with the 1864 Syllabus of Errors. At exactly the same time, Montalembert complained of an authoritarian Vatican squelching honest debate, and regretted that so few American Catholics had placed themselves on the side of freedom in the abolition debate.

A relative absence of Mormon voices in the abolition debate is understandable given the Mormon community's extreme alienation from the cultural mainstream in the pre-Civil War period—an alienation largely caused by the Mormon practice of polygamy. The Mormon church did not formally abandon this practice until decades after the slavery question had been settled in the United States.

DESTRUCTION *is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT” (43). Aware of the boldness of his rhetoric, Walker explains his language in a footnote to his own work:

Do they believe that I would be so foolish as to put out a book of this kind without the strict—ah! very strict commandments of the Lord?—Surely the blacks and whites must think that I am ignorant enough.—Do they think that I would have the audacious wickedness to take the name of my God in vain [. . .]?—He will show you and the world, in due time, whether this book is for his glory, or written by me through envy to the whites, as some have represented. (71 n.)

Walker represents his Appeal as no mere polemic—but rather, as a prophetic testament written in response to “very strict commandments of the Lord.” Is Walker going beyond debate and declaring an opening of the scriptural canon?

Consider Walker’s impact on Maria W. Stewart, an African-American woman abolitionist. In her 1831 tract *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, Stewart pays tribute to Walker, who had died the year prior: “God hath raised you up a Walker and a Garrison. Though Walker sleeps, yet he lives, and his name shall be had in everlasting remembrance” (40). With these words Stewart endorses Walker’s prophetic claims, claiming that he, together with fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, were “raised up” to their respective missions by the divine hand itself. Stewart goes even further in her later discourse. In an 1832 address to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America, for example, Stewart assumes the prophetic mantle herself: “Be not offended because I tell you the truth; for I believe that God has fired my soul with a holy zeal for his cause. It was God alone who inspired my heart to publish the meditations thereof [. . .]. It is the word of God, though men and devils may oppose it. It is

the word of God” (52). Stewart’s description of her own writings<sup>70</sup> as “the word of God” elevates them to the level of scripture. Rather than back away from such a bold claim, Stewart reaffirms her claim to prophethood in her 1833 “Farewell Address” to her friends in Boston: “I believe, that for wise and holy purposes, best known to himself, he [i.e. God] hath unloosed my tongue, and put his words into my mouth, in order to confound and put all those to shame that have rose up against me. For he hath clothed my face with steel, and lined my forehead with brass” (67).

Such bold claims to prophethood are not characteristic of most abolitionist writers, who are generally content with their roles as mere earthly coworkers in the great struggle. Nonetheless, the boldness of the prophetic rhetoric of Walker and Stewart merits special attention. Their words seemingly declare that the canon of revelation remains open; consider their jeremiads in light of Emerson’s divinity school address: “The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed [. . .] indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology. It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake” (107). One could argue that Walker and Stewart fulfill the role of “true teacher” as delineated by Emerson.

The canon-opening discourse of Walker and Stewart represents one strand in the overall tendency of abolitionist writers to destabilize an absolutist approach to the Bible. This notion of an open scriptural canon is explored at greater length by contemporary gay-friendly readers of the Bible. Gay theologian J. Michael Clark established a philosophical groundwork for the opening of the scriptural canon in a 1989 theological manifesto:

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<sup>70</sup> The mention of her “mediations” is possibly a reference to her tract *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*.

A “closed canon” of scripture and a narrow, male-restricted ecclesiastical authority over doctrine and tradition have forced feminist theologians to reject even attempting to “read themselves into” accumulated, canonized (and hence closed) religious experience. Gay theology must do likewise. . . . Our very exclusion, whether as women or as gay people, becomes a criticism of scripture and tradition. Revaluing minority experience, therefore, means penetrating [and] resolving the conflict of experience and tradition by forcibly reopening the canon.<sup>71</sup>

In a sense, David Walker and Maria W. Stewart acted as forerunners in Clark’s proposed movement to forcibly reopen the canon when they adopted the rhetorical style of divinely ordained prophets.

The nexus of canon and prophecy is a fruitful one in contemporary pro-gay discourse about the Bible. In *Sex Positive* Larry Uhrig boldly states, “Gay and lesbian people have a prophetic role. We are prophets and we speak a bold new truth” (70, 71). Uhrig has very specific ideas about the purpose of this prophetic mantle, and about its relationship to the canonical Bible:

Gay and lesbian prophets are speaking a new vision [. . .]. We can no longer waste countless pages debating what the Bible does or does not say [. . .]. It is time to move beyond debate to make out contribution to the union of the worlds

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<sup>71</sup> Clark reproduces this block quote from his 1989 *A Place to Start: Toward an Unapologetic Gay Liberation Theology* in his 1997 book *Defying the Darkness: Gay Theology in the Shadows* (10).

of sexuality and spirituality. Gay people have been raised up by God in this age to be a source of human healing and a place of divine revelation. (10)

For Uhrig, the time for “idle jangling” (to borrow a phrase from Frances E.W. Harper) over biblical verses is over; it is time now to listen to contemporary prophetic voices. Similarly, Dan O. Via privileges the “experience of gay Christians” as a prophetic force that is “powerful enough to override and disqualify the Bible’s absolute condemnation of same-sex intercourse” (“Response” 95). In contrast to Uhrig and Via, Dugan McGinley looks at the canon-busting work of gay people specifically within a Catholic context. McGinley writes that the autobiographical narratives of gay Catholics “should be considered sacred texts for the entire Catholic community, voices which must be heard and analyzed in order to paint a more complete picture of what it means to be Catholic” (27). McGinley’s Catholic canon thus goes beyond Bible and Magisterium to include texts that may bluntly contradict the anti-gay pronouncements of the Magisterium.

These moves towards opening up the sacred canon lead to a natural question: What qualifies a text as modern scripture? Robert Williams posits that “a text is sacred when it ‘rings true to our deepest capacity for truth and goodness.’” He continues, “My own canon of scripture includes the myth of “the Other Half” from Plato’s *Symposium*, and passages by Judy Grahn, Morris West, Audre Lorde, Walt Whitman, Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok, Taylor Caldwell, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Tennessee Williams—passages that speak the truth to me” (*Just As I Am* 68, 69). Carter Heyward also addresses the question as to what qualifies as a sacred text: “Whether it be the biblical creation stories, the book of Ruth, [Alice Walker’s novel] *The Color Purple*, or our mothers’ letters to their friends, scripture reveals God’s involvement in our efforts to cocreate right relation” (*Touching* 85). Both Williams and Heyward thus establish criteria that



are grounded in the impact of scripture on human life. Does the reader's encounter with a given text bring her closer to transcendent truths? Does it move her to treat her fellow humans with greater compassion and justice? Interestingly, Williams has noted that this exploration of a more expansive sacred canon can manifest itself not only as an individual spiritual discipline, but also as a collective exercise within a Christian community:

During Holy Week 1990, the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco held a service of Tenabrae, an ancient liturgy of readings and meditations. The lessons they used for this liturgy ranged from a passage from James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* to poems by Judy Grahn, Walt Whitman, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde, to the closing words of Harvey Milk's will—all of them scriptural, none of them biblical.<sup>72</sup>

Such a collection of readings may, at first glance, seem to have little connection to the jeremiads of David Walker and Mariah W. Stewart. Nonetheless, this San Francisco congregation shares with those fiery abolitionists a tendency to expand the canon of sacred literature.

Of course, it could be argued that many contemporary anti-gay Christian Right figures also write and speak as if they were divinely ordained prophets; it could also be argued that many of their followers latch onto these leaders' writings and orations as if they constituted a third biblical testament. Even where these arguments prove true, however, I argue that there is a profound difference between this anti-gay rhetoric and the canon-opening impulse among contemporary gay-friendly Christians. When anti-gay Protestant fundamentalist figures adopt a

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<sup>72</sup> *Just As I Am* 69. It is worth noting that the body of "extrabiblical scripture" chosen by this church mirrors the same literary diversity of the canonical Bible; the extrabiblical texts are drawn from the genres of narrative, poetry, and legal document.

prophetic rhetorical style, they still maintain their tradition's fetishistic valorization of the Bible; in contrast, the writings of Carter Heyward, Robert Williams, and the other gay-friendly theologians quoted above tends to challenge such bibliocentrism. Secondly, the prophetic-style rhetoric of anti-gay Protestant fundamentalists remains both in service of heterosexual privilege and dismissive of the sufferings that this rhetoric may cause, either directly or indirectly, to gay people. The canon-busting moves of contemporary pro-gay Christians, in contrast, is inextricably linked to their own valorization of human rights and human compassion (their "Higher Law," if you will) over textual legalism. This pro-gay move to expand the scriptural canon thus links back once more to Walker and Stewart, whose outrage at the injustices heaped upon their fellow African-Americans fired them to engage in their own canon-destabilizing rhetoric over a century ago.

**“[T]URN THAT STORY AROUND”:  
RESISTANT READING OF THE BIBLE**

The contribution of David Walker and Maria W. Stewart to abolitionist rhetoric extends beyond their moves towards opening the prophetic canon. Both writers also demonstrate resistant reading: an approach to the text in which one defies the assumptions and agendas which may seem present in a more literal reading of the text. Judith Fetterley enunciated the principles of resistant reading in her 1978 study *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. This book, in Fetterley's own words, "is based on the premise that we read and that what we read affects us—drenches us [. . .] in its assumptions, and that to avoid drowning in that drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read" (viii). The readerly stance championed by

Fetterley in this book is as relevant to the analysis of biblical texts as it is to the study of American fiction. Consider, for example, Walker's account of a South Carolina religious service:

I fixed myself in a complete position to hear the word of My Saviour and to receive such as I thought was authenticated by the Holy Scriptures; but to my no ordinary astonishment, our Reverend Gentleman got up and told us (coloured people) that slaves must be obedient to their masters—must do their duty to their masters or be whipped—the whip was made for the backs of fools &c. Here I pause for a moment, to give the world time to consider what was my surprise, to hear such preaching from a minister of my Master, whose very gospel is that of peace and not of blood and whips, as this pretended preacher tried to make us believe. (39)

The pastor's sermon, as recalled by Walker, appears to reference several biblical verses—namely, Proverbs 26:3, Luke 12:47, and Ephesians 6:5.<sup>73</sup> The last of these three verses is a direct command: "Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." Walker resists the proslavery preacher's message. His resistance, however, appears to move not only against the preacher but also against the biblical verses which the preacher cites; as Walker explains, these particular verses conflict with his own conception of the core gospel message.

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<sup>73</sup> The first of the two verses in full are as follows: "A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back" (Proverbs 26:3); "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not *himself*, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*" (Luke 12:47). See also my discussion of anti-abolitionist readings of Ephesians 6:5, 6 and Colossians 3:22, 23 in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Maria W. Stewart offers another example of resistant reading in an 1833 address delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston. Railing against the “deprivations, fraud, and opposition” which reduce many African-Americans to poverty, Stewart declares, “Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name, like the names of the great men that are in the earth, while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support” (59). In her simile Stewart references the biblical narratives about King Solomon found in 1 Kings 9:15-23 and 2 Chronicles 8:1-9. These narratives not only describe Solomon’s building projects, but also describe how he levied a “tribute of bondservice” upon the peoples conquered by Israel (1 Kings 9:21). Significantly, the authors of these particular narratives do not fault Solomon for building temple, palace and city wall, or for employing indentured servants. In fact, they praise him highly; both authors go on to write that Solomon was renowned throughout the earth for his wisdom, and both specifically declare that this wisdom was given to him by God (1 Kings 10:24; 2 Chronicles 9:23). Stewart’s reading of the Solomon stories thus cuts against the grain of these texts; by reading Solomon in light of the African-American experience, she engages in resistant reading.

The practice of resistant reading also surfaces in Martin R. Delany’s novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, serialized from 1859 to 1862. In the novel the rebellious slave Henry is chastised by a fellow slave named Daddy Joe:

“Don’t Henry, don’t! De wud say ‘stan’ still an’ see de salbation.”

“That’s no talk for me, Daddy Joe; I’ve been ‘standing still’ long enough—I’ll ‘stand still’ no longer.”

“Den yeh no call t’bey God wud? Take cah, boy, take cah!”

“Yes, I have, and I intend to obey it, but that part was intended for the Jews, a people long since dead. I’ll obey that intended for me.” (210)

The argument between Henry and Daddy Joe focuses on a particular biblical verse: “And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD” (Exodus 14:13). Whereas Daddy Joe uses this verse as a proof-text to support a position of complacent obedience, Henry resists this message as inapplicable to him.

An ideological basis for the types of resistant Bible reading practiced by Walker and Stewart, and depicted in Delany’s novel, may be found in the Gary David Comstock’s 1993 manifesto *Gay Theology without Apology*: “[B]iblical stories revolve around the concerns and control of powerful men and those who serve them; and I am convinced now that to read them apologetically without criticism or protest is to allow myself to be flattened by them, to accommodate myself to them” (51). The idea that one could, like Martin Delany’s fictional Henry, so “protest” against a troublesome part of the Bible is a concept that directly challenges the core principles of absolutist hermeneutics. Comstock offers a sample of his resistant reading strategy in action in his analysis of Esther 1:10-22. In this narrative, the Persian king Ahasuerus, in a state of alcohol-fueled merriment, orders his royal chamberlains to “bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on” (v. 11). After Vashti refuses to consent to being thus put on public display, she is stripped of her royal position as punishment. Comstock comments:

I am under no illusion about the meaning and purpose of Vashti’s story as it appears in the Bible. It was not intended as a model for me or anyone else’s liberation. Quite the opposite. In its context, it is a story about a woman who gets trashed for being strong. That she is disposed of is not meant to elicit sympathy

or incite protest; if anything, it is a reminder of the cost of refusal and resistance.

It is meant to frighten women and those who are expected to keep silent, to obey.

(56)

However, Comstock declares that resistant readers can “turn that story around, name it for what it is, bring attention to it. We counter the attempt to make this a brief reminder of what is unacceptable behavior and insist that Vashti’s was a righteous action and an unjust punishment” (56). Other gay-friendly readers of the Bible add to Comstock’s challenge by noting that other types of biblical texts beyond narratives can similarly be “turned around.” Horace L. Griffin, for example, takes an alternative view of the epistles of Paul—texts in which the author presents same-gender sexuality in a negative light. Griffin asks, “If Paul had been able to write about homosexual activity today with our level of knowledge, exposure, and critical thought, would he have drawn the same conclusions about homosexuality?” After considering how Paul might be affected by “the Christian witness and dedicated church work of the millions of lesbian and gay Christians [. . .] serving congregations, shelters, choirs, youth programs, seniors, and community outreach services,” Griffin answers his own hypothetical question: “I say a resounding no” (74). Whether considering historical narrative or apostolic directive, Comstock and Griffin both work against literalistic readings of biblical texts.

In their practices of resistant reading, Comstock and Griffin both examine the Bible from a critical stance, rather than bowing obediently before a literalistic reading of the text. In *Touching Our Strength* Carter Heyward reflects further on such an approach to the Bible: “If we study the bible with a critical eye, which we must if our minds are set on justice, we discover ways in which the eternal Wellspring of justice was or was not, is or is not, present in a particular story or interpretation” (83). Thus for Heyward justice is an imperative by which both biblical

texts and the interpretations thereof are judged. She goes on to declare that such a critical style of reading will reveal “that the sacred sensual power in our yearning for mutuality in relation to one another did not condone, much less authorize, the silencing of women in the churches (1 Corinthians), the keeping of slaves (Ephesians), or the rejection of homosexual persons” (Genesis, Leviticus, Romans)” (83). Heyward’s dismissal of texts used traditionally as tools to control or demonize women, enslaved persons, and gay people is seconded by William Sloane Coffin, who ponders, “Why can’t Christians just admit that there is such a thing as biblical deadwood, not to say biblical folly?” (63).

As shown in the examples above, resistant reading of the Bible may involve many dimensions, among them outright rejection of legalistic directives and reclaiming of marginalized characters in historical narratives. Whatever form this type of reading takes, however, it is, as practiced by abolitionist and gay-friendly writers, not just resistance for resistance’s own sake. Rather, the resistant reading practices of liberationist readers of the Bible subordinate both biblical texts and the interpretations thereof to an overarching vision of justice; thus, this reading strategy ties back to the “Higher Law” concept enunciated by John Greenleaf Whittier.

### **“NO DANGEROUS TALE”:**

#### **EXPLORING BIBLICAL POLYVOCALITY AND BIBLICAL AMBIGUITIES**

Another mode of resistant Bible reading is an approach that draws attention to polyvocality and ambiguity within the biblical canon. Such an approach would be anathema to anti-abolitionist and anti-gay adherents of the Bible; as noted in the third chapter of the present

work, each of these reactionary camps trumpet the doctrine that the entire Bible speaks with a clear and unified voice. In contrast, a number of abolitionist writers pointed out areas where biblical authors seem to contradict each other. In her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe explores the concept of biblical polyvocality via a discussion between two riverboat passengers. Quoting the curse on Noah's grandson Canaan (Genesis 9:25)—a favorite pro-slavery proof-text—the first character, an unnamed clergyman, declares, “It pleased Providence, for some inscrutable reason, to doom the race to bondage, ages ago; and we must not set our low opinion against that” (121). One of the clergyman's fellow travelers responds with a biblical citation of his own: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). The unnamed traveler glosses the verse thus: “I suppose [. . .] *that* is Scripture, as much as “cursed be Canaan”” (122). Significantly, the second character goes to a verse which not only seems to contradict the harshness of the patriarchal-era curse, but also points towards a more humane ethical standard.

The exchange between Stowe's riverboat passengers underscores a key idea of abolitionist writers: the notion that the Bible's very polyvocality and ambiguity make it possible for two parties at cross-purposes to both use it as a tool. John Greenleaf Whittier expresses this idea in his 1843 poem “The Christian Slave.” The poem includes a satiric address apparently directed to those who provided master-sanctioned Bible lessons to slaves:

Con well thy lesson o'er,  
Thou prudent teacher, tell the toiling slave  
No dangerous tale of Him who came to save  
The outcast and the poor.  
  
But wisely shut the ray



Of God's free Gospel from her simple heart

And to her darkened mind alone impart

One stern command, Obey! (87-88)

Whittier's line, "One stern command, Obey!" is, in the context of religious "education" directed at slaves, most likely an allusion to such popular pro-slavery proof-texts as Ephesians 6:5. And yet, despite the cultural and psychological power of such proof-texts, Whittier asserts that some of the gospel narratives constitute a danger to the slavemaster's agenda. The hero of Martin Delany's novel *Blake* strikes a similar chord as he seeks to sow the seeds of rebellion among the slaves:

"You must make your religion subserve your interests, as your oppressors do theirs!" advised Henry. "They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of 'obedience to your masters' and 'standing still to see the salvation,' and we must now begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us." (41)

As does Whittier, so too does Delany (through Henry) allude to Ephesians 6:5, demonstrating once again the pervasiveness of Pauline proof-texts in anti-abolitionist rhetoric. And again like Whittier, Delany indicates that the Bible can be made to speak in a voice that is contrary to that anti-abolitionist perspective.

The concepts of biblical polyvocality and ambiguity are applicable to debates beyond that over abolitionism. Abolitionist Maria W. Stewart, for example, called attention to biblical polyvocality on the public role of women in order to defend her own position as an activist speaker and writer. In her 1833 "Farewell Address" she declares: "What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a

mother, and a judge in Israel?” (68). Although she thus cites Judges 4:4, she is not merely aping the type of proof-texting practiced by anti-abolitionists. As Stewart continues, she cites the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman who publicly declared him to be the Messiah (John 4:1-29). Stewart glosses this gospel narrative with a reference to the Pauline epistles: “St. Paul declared that it was a shame for women to speak in public, yet our great High Priest did not condemn the [Samaritan] woman for a more notorious offense than this; neither will he condemn [me]” (68). Stewart’s Pauline reference is to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. By thus positioning the Pauline injunction in opposition to the example of Deborah and the Samaritan woman, Stewart indicates that the Bible speaks with more than one voice on the public role of women.

Just as Stewart broadens the field on which biblical polyvocality and ambiguity might be explored, so to do contemporary gay-positive writers. Maurine Waun, for example, observes, “If we look closely at the Bible we will see that we really do not have a clear sexual ethic” (119). Waun then reviews a laundry list of biblical ambiguities and paradoxes surrounding human sexuality:

In certain scriptures, we find men of God who have many wives, slaves, and mistresses with whom they are allowed to have sexual relations [. . .]. There are women of God who solve the problem of barrenness by lying with in-laws, out-laws, or incestuous partners. Serial monogamy appears as a model in some settings, as well as a mandate not to marry at all, unless the urgency of lust proves too much to bear. Adultery occurs in high and low places, and divorce seems to be an option for a variety of reasons. (119-20)

Waun concludes: “If we try to extrapolate from the entirety of Scripture a single, clearly defined sexual ethic, we find that it is virtually impossible” (120). Seconding Waun’s assessment is the

author of a parodic document which proposes twelve new amendments to the United States Constitution. The document is a clear response to the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment, which would, at the federal level, limit marriage to opposite-gender couples; in fact, the first of the satiric amendments is essentially the same as the real proposed amendment. The flavor of the document, entitled “Proposal to Amend United States Constitution to Conform to Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage,” is indicated by a sample of some of the additional proposed amendments:

AMENDMENT XXVIII.

No state may sanction marriage between a man and a woman who was married previously but has since been divorced (Matthew 5:32).

AMENDMENT XXIX.

No state may sanction marriage involving a widow (unless it is to her brother-in-law-see amendment 34). All women whose husbands have passed away are to refrain from intimacy and pleasure for the remainder of their lives (1 Timothy 5:5-15).

AMENDMENT XXXI.

No state may sanction marriage between people of different races (Deuteronomy 7:3; Numbers 25:6-8; 36:3-9; 1 Kings 11:2; Ezra 9:2; Nehemiah 13:25-27).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Each of the remaining mock amendments similarly cites one or more biblical passages as its “justification.”

The author of the proposal, in these and other mock amendments, thus brings together many of the varying biblical voices that speak on sex and marriage, and thereby demonstrates the problematic nature of that collective witness.

Among those who, like Maurine Waun and the author of the satiric “Proposal,” have interrogated the Bible’s ambiguous messages on human sexuality is Nancy Wilson. In *Our Tribe* Wilson “rubs” the biblical narrative in Judges 19:16-30 against the better-known story of the destruction of Sodom. The Judges 19 narrative is strikingly similar to the Sodom story: in the Judges 19 narrative a traveling Levite and his concubine are given shelter by a man in Gibeah. The men of the city accost the host at his door, demanding, “Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him” (v. 22). Attempting to dissuade the unruly mob from their intentions, the host offers up his own virgin daughter, as well as the Levite’s concubine, in his male guest’s stead. It is at this point that the Sodom story and the Judges 19 narrative sharply diverge. Whereas the men of Sodom reject the offer of women, the men of Gibeah ultimately take the concubine and rape her all night long; she apparently dies as a result of the ordeal.<sup>75</sup> Wilson comments: “The *threatened* rape of the two (male) angels in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has excited more outrage (and homophobia) for two thousand years than the actual

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<sup>75</sup> Unsurprisingly, this brutal story appears to have generated little interest in popular culture; compare its reception to that of so many other biblical narratives, which continue to inspire children’s books, motion picture adaptations, and other cultural productions. One noteworthy response to the story of the Levite’s concubine, however, is offered by comic book artist Steve Gibson and collaborator Neil Gaiman. Their six-page comic adaptation “Journey to Bethlehem” appears in the comic anthology *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament*. Gibson’s unflinching, black-and-white depiction of the gang rape is particularly horrific. Interestingly, the *Outrageous Tales* anthology, whose title indicates its overarching satiric thrust, also contains writer/artist Dave Gibbons’ take on the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative.

rape and murder of this woman” (101). Like the author of the mock amendments, Wilson draws the reader’s eye to a problematic, and neglected, biblical text, in order to critique the use of the Bible in anti-gay propaganda.

Other pro-gay writers have also noted that those who selectively listen to the biblical “voices” which might be employed in support of an oppressive agenda invariably ignore other voices from the scriptural canon. Horace L. Griffin, for example, makes the following observation about a group of Christian clergymen who employed to the Bible in the formulation of an anti-gay proclamation: “In doing so they ignore other biblical mandates, for example, stoning disobedient sons (Deut. 21:21), granting divorce only in cases of sexual unfaithfulness (Matt. 19:9), giving up wealth (Matt. 19:21), and greeting everyone with a kiss (2 Cor. 13:12)” (92). Robert Williams levies a similar criticism against one notorious anti-gay spokeswoman: “When Anita Bryant was quoting passages from Leviticus to prove God hates homosexuality, she seldom wore a hat, so she was ignoring a New Testament passage, 1 Corinthians 11:5, which prohibits a woman from ‘proclaiming God’s message in public’ without a covering on her head” (40). Griffin and Williams each thus indicate an intellectual and moral weakness in the mechanics of anti-gay biblical proof-texting.

The critiques offered by Maurine Waun, Horace L. Griffin, and other gay-friendly readers of the Bible leads to a question: How should gay-friendly Christians and Jews deal with the phenomena of biblical polyvocality and ambiguity? Many pro-gay adherents of the Bible in fact embrace what Peter Gomes calls the “ambiguous witness of the Bible” (78). Dan O. Via, for example, while declaring that he considers the Bible to be “the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters,” adds the following caveat: “Authority does not mean perfection or inerrancy or complete consistency” (“The Bible” 2). Ken Stone declares that his own reading

strategy is in fact focused on what he terms “the multivocality of the canon as a whole.” He continues: “‘The Bible’ is not, as many of its defenders *and* critics suppose, a unified document that speaks in a single voice. It is not even a collection of voices that always articulate consistent, or compatible, points of view” (109). Also embracing biblical ambiguity is Cheri DiNovo, who finds in the very person of Christ a model for this paradox. Citing Luke 12:8-10, she writes: “Luke’s Jesus is not afraid to contradict himself in the space of a few lines. He says if the reader/listener/disciple/we disown him we will be disowned and then immediately says we may speak words against him and be forgiven” (63). But DiNovo also declares that Luke’s self-contradictory Jesus is no anomaly in the context of the larger biblical canon; she observes that within that larger canon, “[m]any voices raise praises to the many faces of God in many, often contradictory ways” (25). The voices of Via, Stone, and DiNovo form a sharp contrast to those of the many anti-gay writers cited in the preceding chapter of this present work; so many of those anti-gay writers seem to cling to the concept of a unified, unambiguous biblical “voice.” Gay-friendly readers of the Bible do not need this illusion of solidity.

To what end do pro-gay adherents of the Bible use the alternative, sometimes overlooked, messages one might find in this ambiguous, polyvocal Bible? Like Martin Delany’s fictional Henry, many pro-gay voices declare that this at times discordant canon can be used towards a greater good. In *Our Tribe* lesbian minister Nancy Wilson writes, “For me, the Bible is an elastic, resilient friend who bounces back and even talks when I question it” (75). Robert Goss similarly hears in the Bible voices with the potential to inspire:

Queer Christians use their liberating practice to read the Bible anew. The Bible bursts with claims about a God who is passionately partial to the poor, who enlists people in justice-doing, and who promises a just society for all. Queer Christians

can use their scriptural claims as an empowering resource for their liberative practice: they can shape their lives to God's justice-doing. (99)

Goss's focus on the overarching imperative of justice links him, and like-minded people of faith, back to those abolitionists who similarly placed the concerns of justice above slavishly literalistic readings of biblical proof-texts.

### **“JESUS ENTERS FROM THE MARGINS”:**

#### ***PHANTASIE* AND METAPHOR IN LIBERATIONIST HERMENEUTICS**

Those abolitionist writers who perceived that the Bible could be ambiguous and self-contradictory could not simply mirror the proof-text approach to the Bible taken by the defenders of slavery; such an approach would have been intellectually inconsistent. Still, biblical citations play a significant role in abolitionist poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose. So the questions arise: How did abolitionists make use of the Bible? Did any common mechanisms animate their collective appropriation of specific texts and allusions?

To begin to answer these questions, one might start with Harriet Jacobs' groundbreaking 1861 memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs writes harshly of a preacher, identified as “Mr. Pike” in the text,<sup>76</sup> who is assigned to deliver sermons to slaves; his sermons use intimidating language to encourage obedience towards his congregation's owners. The author compares Mr. Pike to the slaves she sees worshiping at a “Methodist shout”: “Many of them are

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<sup>76</sup> In her introduction to the 1987 Harvard University Press edition of *Incidents*, editor Jean Fagan Yellin points out that Jacobs used fictitious names for a number of the real individuals described in the text (xv).

sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other longfaced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side” (69-70). Jacobs’ critique alludes to the story of the “good Samaritan,” one of the New Testament’s most enduring and iconic stories (Luke 10:25-37). Consider also Jacobs’ critique of those who aid in the capture of fugitive slaves: “Yet when victims make their escape from the wild beast of slavery, northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive slave back into his den, ‘full of dead men’s bones, and all uncleanness’” (35-36). Jacobs’ condemnation incorporates a quote from Matthew 23:27, in which Jesus condemns the religious legalism and hypocrisy of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. Jacobs’ use of the Bible in these two passages is fundamentally different from the type of proof-texting widely employed in anti-abolitionist literature. Anti-abolitionist writers generally sought out texts which dealt specifically with the institutions of slavery and indentured servitude. In doing so they treated the Bible as a sort of authoritative legal code whose mandates on interpersonal economic relationships remained binding on modern Christians. In contrast, Jacobs goes to texts which have nothing directly to do with the issue of slavery. Luke’s parable of the good Samaritan looks instead at broader issues of religious legalism and human compassion; likewise does the passage from Matthew’s gospel. Jacobs uses these passages in a metaphoric, rather than literal and legalistic, mode; she draws a moral and spiritual analogy between biblical figures and nineteenth-century individuals.

This metaphoric approach to the Bible was employed by a number of Jacobs’ fellow abolitionists. In his poem “The Christian Slave,” for example, John Greenleaf Whittier writes

Grave, reverend men shall tell  
From Northern pulpits how thy work was blest,  
While in that vile South Sodom first and best,



Thy poor disciples sell. (88)

Although Whittier's reference to Sodom may bring to readers' minds the notorious narrative of Genesis 19, he may be alluding to the condemnation of that ancient city made by the prophet Ezekiel: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). In any case, neither these passages, nor any other biblical references to Sodom, deal with the issue of slavery; yet Whittier employs this allusion in his critique of southern slavery. A similar rhetorical strategy is employed by Maria W. Stewart in her 1833 address delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston: "It appears to me that America has become like the great city of Babylon, for she has boasted in her heart: 'I sit like a queen and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow [Revelation 18:7]!' She is, indeed, a seller of slaves and the souls of men" (63). Like Jacobs and Whittier, Stewart enriches her anti-slavery message with biblical citations that, while not dealing at all with the specifics of slavery, touch on transcendent moral and theological concerns.

In order to better contextualize this non-literal use of the Bible by abolitionists, I turn to contemporary gay theologian Robert Williams. He borrows a concept called *phantasie* from German theologian Dorothee Sölle (and retains the German spelling in order to separate the term from connotations associated with the English word *fantasy*). Williams defines *phantasie* thus: "We must supplement what we can 'know' through historic and scientific methods with what we 'know' from our own religious experience, from the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking within our own souls [. . .]. *Phantasie* is a process of creative imagining—not escapism, but active, faithful imagining of possibilities" (55-56). In *Touching Our Strength*, Carter Heyward also discusses *phantasie* in a biblical context; she defines it as "a blend of intuition and what feminist

theologian Alison Cheek has named ‘historical imagination’” (84). *Phantasie* might thus be seen as a mode of biblical interpretation that is a polar opposite of legalistic proof-texting; whereas absolutist readers of the Bible approach it as a sort of rule book, practitioners of *phantasie* approach the same canon with a mixture of imagination and intuition. Through the lens of *phantasie* the Bible becomes not a source of dry legal directives, but an inspiration for metaphoric thought and language. That metaphoric mode in turn illuminates the “Higher Law” described by John Greenleaf Whittier—a transcendent ethical standard “[w]hose tablets in the heart are set.”

Although they may not incorporate the specific term *phantasie* into their own hermeneutical vocabularies, many pro-gay scholars and activists write in this mode when discussing the Bible. This gay-friendly *phantasie* often focuses on specific characters and narratives which become affirming touchstones. Consider, for example, Chris Glaser’s analysis of the Old Testament patriarch Joseph in his study *Coming Out as Sacrament*. Joseph is a major figure in the Pentateuch; his story extends from chapters thirty-seven through fifty of the book of Genesis. One of the sons of the patriarch Jacob, Joseph is marked as different from the rest of the brothers due to the multi-colored coat<sup>77</sup> he is given by his father, and also due to his prophetic dreams—dreams which foreshadow Joseph’s exalted destiny (Genesis 37:4-11).

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph’s signature garment is described as “a coat of *many* colours” (Genesis 37:3) in the King James Version; although this iconic image has taken firm root in popular culture, more recent translations break with that classic phraseology. The New Revised Standard Version describes the garment as “a long robe with sleeves,” although, in his annotations to the NRSV Genesis, Joel W. Rosenberg offers “striped coat” as an alternate translation (56 n. 37.3). The New International Version renders the phrase “a richly ornamented robe,” although a footnote admits that the translation is “uncertain” (*NIV Study Bible* 62 n. b).

Rather than endear him to his brothers, Joseph's dreams inspire envy, and his brothers ultimately sell him into slavery in order to be rid of him and his dreams (Genesis 37:19-27). Ironically, dreamer Joseph's ability to interpret the prophetic dreams of others enables him not only to gain freedom from slavery, but also to attain a position of influence in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh. After so rising to power, Joseph is reunited with his brothers, who fail to recognize him. After some intrigue involving a silver cup, Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers, and the family rift is healed with tearful kisses and opulent gifts (Genesis 45:1-28). There is nothing in this entire lengthy narrative which at all deals with homosexuality. Yet in Joseph Glaser finds a powerfully iconic figure for contemporary sexual minorities: "Just as Joseph did, we have come out as self-affirming, avowed, practicing, and unrepentant *dreamers*, who dream of finding both ministry and reconciliation within our families of faith" (53). Glaser continues:

Lesbians and gay men and bisexuals and the transgendered are in good company—a cloud of self-affirming, practicing dreamers. We share with Joseph the feeling of destiny, of being called to some unique task. We share with Joseph not a multicolored coat but a multicolored banner, our rainbow flag that celebrates our diversity while claiming the sacred promise of the rainbow. (54)

Joseph moves from being a marginalized "other" to a position where his very "otherness"—i.e. his supernatural attunement to the world of human dreams—is valued and affirmed; he progresses from being rejected by member of his family to a place where he can make his family whole once more. Thus for Glaser Joseph symbolizes both the pains and the hopes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives.

It is not only such major figures of the Bible, however, that have been the subjects of such flights of *phantasie*. Consider Tamar, a relative of Joseph. Her story, found in Genesis 38,

constitutes an episode within the larger narrative of Joseph's family. Tamar's story is tied to the figure of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers. Married to Er, a son of Judah, Tamar is left a widow. Dutiful patriarch Judah issues orders to Onan, another of his sons: "Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother" (v. 8). A resistant Onan, not willing to "give seed to his brother," does not fulfil his father's command, and is slain by Yahweh for his disobedience (vv. 9, 10). Judah orders Tamar to remain a widow until a third son, Shelah, is old enough to marry her. But after Shelah reaches maturity and Tamar realizes that Judah has not kept his promise, she takes matters into her own hands. Disguising herself, she tricks her father-in-law into having sexual intercourse with, and impregnating, her. Not realizing that he is the father of Tamar's unborn issue, Judah, in full patriarchal mode, orders her execution; thus backed into a potentially fatal corner, the woman reveals her deception (vv. 14-25). Judah, admitting his failure in the entire fiasco, declares of Tamar, "She hath been more righteous than I" (v. 26). From the union of Judah and Tamar are born the twins Pharez and Zerah (vv. 29, 30). Tamar's disguised identity during this family intrigue is particularly significant. Although her assumed role is translated as "harlot" throughout the venerable King James Version, Joel W. Rosenberg notes that two different terms are used in the Hebrew text for Tamar's deceptive persona: *zonah* and *kedēshah*. Rosenberg explains that while the first term may literally mean "one who whores for sustenance," the second term, literally meaning "sacred woman," refers to a temple prostitute (58 n. 38.21). In *Practicing Safer Text*, Ken Stone considers the significance of the cultic prostitute role thus adopted by Tamar: "By acting as one of these public women, Tamar positions herself at the margins of the gender, sexual, and kinship systems of ancient Israel" (66). Stone also notes that her sexual behavior places her "outside accepted conventions of her society" to such a degree that it almost causes her to be killed (67). In the climax of her

story, however, the marginalized and threatened Tamar becomes, for Stone, an empowering figure:

Rather than attributing to Tamar's story a single, stable meaning which places Tamar always in the position of victim, I prefer to emphasize the fact that, within a society organized to her disadvantage, Tamar is willing to use whatever tools are at her disposal to achieve her goals [. . .]. She acts first in secret, and [. . .] her "coming out" exposes the hypocrisy of those most eager to defend the system of sex, gender and kinship within which Tamar was expected to live. (67)

Tamar's story thus becomes a metaphor for an empowered queer life—a life which must at times be lived in a mode of deception due to the dangers from societal bigotry. As does Chris Glaser in his reading of Joseph, so too does Stone draw on the concept of "coming out"—the process, well recognized in contemporary popular culture, by which a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person reveals his or her sexual "otherness" to those who might not previously have been aware of it. Joseph and Tamar do not "come out" as literally "queer" in the way that these terms are popularly used today. Nonetheless, they both "come out" in the sense that they reveal very personal truths about themselves—truths that shake up their community, and that reveal the flaws of social systems that marginalize certain individuals.

Gay-friendly biblical *phantasie* extends also to key figures in the New Testament. Perhaps no such figure has fired gay-friendly imaginations more powerfully than that of the New Testament's central name, Jesus of Nazareth. Cheri DiNovo playfully riffs on a popular hymn,

“Jesus is queer, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”<sup>78</sup> But the creative reimagining of Jesus by DiNovo and other pro-gay voices goes much deeper than a catchy slogan. DiNovo focuses in particular on the figure of Jesus as portrayed in the gospel of Mark:

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus enters from the margins, from nowhere, from Nazareth [. . .]. He forgives sins blasphemously, according to Pharisaic law, and eats with social outcasts, never leaving the margins, always on the edges of temple life [. . .]. Immediately, he is shown to be a religious lawbreaker, especially where laws of propriety are concerned. Jesus eats and drinks during fasts, works on the Sabbath, and declares himself Lord over the Sabbath (2:18-28). He turns from his biological family and declares the sinners and misfits that he attracts around him to be his true family (3:33-35). (58-59)

DiNovo draws a similar conclusion from her reading of the gospel of John. Remarking on Jesus’ cryptic preachings in this text, she writes, “He is strange, odd, weird, unusual, unique; queer. John’s Jesus turns the tables” (61). Jesus is thus not “queer” in the sense of literally being gay, bisexual, or transgendered. But, as does Chris Glaser in the patriarch Joseph, and Ken Stone in Tamar, DiNovo finds in Jesus a “queerness” that is rooted in his marginality. As lord of the “misfits,” Jesus thus becomes, in DiNovo’s estimation, a touchstone for contemporary sexual minorities. Sharing this reading with DiNovo is Maurine Waun, who focuses in particular on

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<sup>78</sup> DiNovo 57. DiNovo’s line plays with the first stanza of the well-known children’s hymn “Jesus Loves Me”: “Jesus loves me! This I know,/ for the Bible tells me so” (Warner and McGuire).

one of Jesus' parables—namely, the parable of the “Great Banquet.”<sup>79</sup> In this brief parable, a man gives a great feast, but his invited guests all offer excuses for not attending. The host thus orders his servant to go into the city streets “and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind” (Luke 14:21) to share in the feast. Waun observes that in Jesus' culture, with its emphasis on the “politics of purity,” this notion of such a communal table was truly radical. “However,” she continues, “Jesus was so intentional about this idea of inclusive love and compassion that he was always in trouble with the religious authorities over it, and yet he continued to push the issue” (110). Waun contrasts this convention-smashing storyteller with the entrenched anti-gay position held by much of institutional Christendom: “[W]e have not truly followed the Jesus described in the gospels—the one who shows us how to be radically loving and inclusive. In the name of religion we have hated, pushed away, condemned, and excluded, instead of embracing” (110). Whereas for DiNovo Jesus is the prototype for queerness, for Waun Jesus should be the role model for a church that embraces the queer.

Like DiNovo and Waun, other LGBT-friendly writers have also found an empowering example in the figure of Jesus. Justin Tanis, a transgender male writer, turns in particular to Matthew's story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28). As a Canaanite, this woman would have been a social and cultural “other” to the Jews of Jesus' day.<sup>80</sup> When she seeks Jesus help in healing her daughter, he initially rejects her, declaring, “It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast *it* to dogs” (v. 26). But the woman persists, and

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<sup>79</sup> Versions of the Great Banquet parable are found in Luke 14:16-24 and Matthew 21:2-10.

<sup>80</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. notes that in the Bible the “general usage of ‘Canaanites’ was most important as a term marking ethnic boundaries, distinguishing the Israelites from the indigenous peoples with whom intermarriage was to be avoided.”

Jesus grants the requested healing. Tanis comments, “The image of Jesus turning away a woman who is seeking healing for her sick child is not the image of Jesus that I was taught in Sunday school. It is troubling, disturbing, and challenging” (43). Tanis also highlights the fact that Jesus uses an epithet in addressing this woman. Tanis’ reaction points to a larger cultural practice within Christendom—the selectivity with which biblical passages are chosen and “spun” for communal consumption in institutional settings. The Jesus of Matthew 15:21-28 was not the “Jesus” that was packaged and fed to Tanis’ younger self in Sunday school; yet it is to this passage that the adult Tanis, as an out transgender man, turns for inspiration. Noting that the story contains “a powerful message of inclusion,” Tanis writes further of this brief narrative: “It is a familiar tale to those of us on the margins of ‘acceptability’ who have experienced rejection from those in power [. . .]. Those within the church have resorted, as Jesus did, initially, to epithets rather than compassion” (44). Tanis’ interpretation of this narrative, while squarely within the tradition of liberationist *phantasie*, nonetheless adds a striking twist to the work done by Chris Glaser with the Joseph saga and by Ken Stone with the Tamar narrative. Glaser takes a major, iconic biblical patriarch and emphasizes his role as a marginalized “other” in order to revision him as a liberatory archetype for LGBT readers; Stone takes a figure who, while less central to the overall sweep of Genesis than Joseph, also experiences the peril of marginality, and, like Glaser, finds in her a sort of LGBT-friendly role model. Tanis shakes up the reading technique of Glaser and Stone by taking the New Testament’s central figure—a figure lionized throughout Christendom as the epitome of compassion and righteousness—and seizing upon the one episode in which this figure both refuses to aid a marginalized “other” and uses a slur against her in the process. In other words, Glaser and Stone position, respectively, Joseph and Tamar as symbolic of contemporary sexual minorities, whereas Tanis positions Jesus as symbolic of the



persecutors of those minorities. But Tanis does not let his analogy end on this negative note: “Jesus’ first reaction, however, was not his last word. Jesus himself is transformed during this interaction. For me, as a transsexual man, this story is a powerful one with its dual message of human determination and God’s abundance” (44). Although this gospel narrative does not deal at all with the issue of transsexuality, Tanis nonetheless can relate the larger issues illuminated by the story to his immediate life as a transsexual man.

Also focusing in on a gospel narrative is Irene Monroe, albeit with a tone much different than that of Tanis. In an editorial entitled “A Tale of Two Marys,” Monroe re-reads the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, against the contemporary drama surrounding Mary Cheney, the daughter of Dick Cheney, the vice president of the United States. The latter Mary, an openly lesbian woman, worked on the re-election campaign of her father and his running mate, President George W. Bush, in 2004. Mary Cheney’s service on behalf of an administration seen by many as hostile to gay rights made her a polarizing figure<sup>81</sup>; the controversy surrounding her escalated in 2006 when her pregnancy became known. Because she lived openly with a female partner, Mary Cheney thus represented the type of alternative family feared and condemned by the spokespersons of the Christian Right, and she was not spared their attacks in the media. Janice Shaw Crouse, representing the anti-gay Beverly LaHaye Institute, well exemplifies the Christian Right position on Mary Cheney’s pregnancy: “Her action repudiates traditional values and sets an appalling example for young people [. . .]. Mary’s pregnancy is an ‘in-your-face’ action

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<sup>81</sup> Cheney reflects on some of the controversy surrounding her paradoxical career in her 2006 memoir *Now It’s My Turn*. Martin A. Hogan summed up much of the public’s attitude towards Mary Cheney in a review of the memoir: “The ‘right’ hate[s] her for being gay and the ‘left’ hate[s] her for being blatantly hypocritical about it.”

countering the Bush Administration's pro-family, pro-marriage and pro-life policies." As she continues her excoriation, Crouse makes it even more personal: "She continues to repudiate the work to which her father has devoted his life." Monroe's take on the controversial pregnancy is quite different: "It makes me think of another baby, born amid struggle [. . .]. The fact that Jesus came into a nontraditional Jewish family places his story within the struggle for social acceptance in a conservatively recalcitrant political era." Monroe's take on the nativity story refocuses our attention on the marginal, at-risk status of the biblical Mary at the time her pregnancy is discovered. The gospel of Matthew relates that Mary became pregnant before going to live with her husband; although the gospel's author attributes the pregnancy to a supernatural source, he also notes that Mary's husband Joseph, "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (Matthew 1:19, NRSV). Joseph relents only when he also is confronted with a supernatural visitation (Matthew 1:20-25). Monroe continues:

The first Mary's pregnancy is lauded now in Christian tradition as immaculate, but in her day it was viewed as morally reprehensible in Jewish social and cultural law. Like the current Mary, Jesus' mother was viewed with scorn and suspicion. According to Jewish law of the time, children of unwed mothers were called *mamzerin*—Hebrew for illegitimate children. They were subject to restrictions and discrimination that denied them the full privileges of citizenship, just as [Dick] Cheney's grandchild will be denied those privileges.

Monroe's comments underscore the ironic fact that, since Mary Cheney's home state of Virginia recognizes neither same-sex civil unions nor same-sex marriages, her child would not enjoy the legal and societal benefits of being born into such a governmentally-recognized union. Jennifer

Chrisler, executive director of the gay rights group Family Pride, also sounded this theme in her commentary on the Cheney controversy: “The news of Mary Cheney’s pregnancy exemplifies, once again, how the best interests of children are denied when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens are treated unfairly and accorded different and unequal rights and responsibilities than other parents.”<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, Monroe offers her readers a note of hope: “Wouldn’t it be great if we could embrace the pregnancies of both Marys, the old and the new? For Christians, it would be a chance to exalt the diverse configurations of God’s beautiful human family.” Although writing in the mode of political satire, Monroe shares with other biblical *phantasists* the technique of shining a light onto a troubling part of the Bible in order to make a point about contemporary gay rights and dignity.

Joseph and Tamar, Jesus and Mary—as freshly seen through the eyes of gay-friendly readers, these biblical figures assume new, and perhaps surprising, relevance. But it is not only individual characters and discrete episodes that have been the foci of gay-friendly biblical *phantasie*. This imaginative, activist mode of reading has also been used to illuminate broader narratives and motifs within the Bible. One such larger narrative is the story of the Hebrew exodus from bondage in Egypt, an epic saga which extends from the book of Exodus through the book of Joshua. Malcolm Boyd has noted, “The story of the Exodus in the Bible is, it seems to me, very much our story as gay people” (4). Mona West develops this idea further by

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<sup>82</sup> Jim Rutenberg included Chrisler’s comment in his coverage of the Cheney pregnancy. Rutenberg also recorded the response of the Focus on the Family, a Christian Right organization known for its anti-gay activism: “‘Mary Cheney’s pregnancy raises the question of what’s best for children,’ said Carrie Gordon Earll, the group’s director of issues analysis. ‘Just because it’s possible to conceive a child outside of the relationship of a married mother and father doesn’t mean it’s the best for the child.’”

specifically connecting the Exodus narrative to the gay concept of the “closet.” In lesbian and gay cultural vernacular, being “in the closet,” or “closeted,” means that one has not revealed one’s homosexual orientation to others. The process of “coming out of the closet,” or more simply, “coming out,” is the personal journey by which a gay person reveals this personal truth—to family members, co-workers, friends, and/or other individuals for whom this knowledge would be relevant. As gay life and culture has gained wider visibility in the broader American scene, the terms “the closet” and “coming out” have become firmly embedded within that larger popular culture. West writes, “In gay and lesbian experience, closets isolate, enslave, and eventually kill us physically as well as spiritually. Because the Exodus is the crucial event in the formation of the identity of Israel, it is appropriate to draw the parallel that to stay in Egypt would be to stay in the closet.” For West, the coming out process experienced by contemporary gay people is thus comparable to the Israelites’ “coming into their full identity as the people God intended them to be” (74).

As empowering as West’s reading may be, however, Irene Monroe reminds us that reading the Hebrew Exodus in a liberatory mode is not a simple matter. Monroe, who self-identifies as an African-American lesbian feminist, adds to the conversation in her essay on Exodus.<sup>83</sup> She reminds us that, long before the emergence of modern gay culture, the Exodus saga had become a key cultural touchstone in African-American culture: “As a road map for liberation, the Exodus narrative told African Americans how to do what must be done. And in doing so, Nat Turner revolted against slavery, and Harriet Tubman conducted a railroad out of it” (84). However, this revolutionary use of the Exodus narrative eventually bred a reactionary

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<sup>83</sup> All of the Monroe citations in this paragraph are taken from her essay “‘When and Where I Enter, Then the Whole Race Enters with Me’: Que(e)rying Exodus.”

offspring. Monroe looks specifically at the first chapter of Exodus, in which the Egyptian Pharaoh, fearful of the fecundity of the ethnic Hebrews within his domain, orders all of the male Hebrew children to be killed, but the females spared: “Just as the curse of Ham in Genesis 9:25-27 was used as the legitimate biblical sanction for slavery, in the African American Christian and Muslim communities Exodus 1:22 is the legitimate biblical sanction for heterosexism expressed in terms of the ‘endangered black male’” (86). Monroe notes further that Moses, the hero of the Exodus narrative, “is the icon of the black endangered male” and that this interpretive strain “is one of the pillars that upholds and institutionalizes male leaders in the black church” (87). Thus, the very epic narrative which was critical in the liberation of African Americans has ironically become a vehicle for marginalizing women within the black church. Despite the corrosive effect of this androcentric subnarrative, Monroe joins Malcom Boyd and Mona West in celebrating Exodus as a liberatory text for contemporary sexual minorities:

The clarion call for all Israelites to come out of physical bondage, and by extension for all enslaved Africans, is heard in Exodus 5:1, when both Moses and Aaron went to the Pharaoh to relay God’s message, which said, “Let my people go.” So commonly heard in sermons, protest speeches, and spirituals by African Americans, and in the refrain of the best known of all the spirituals “Go Down, Moses,” “Let my people go” was one of the first calls for black revolt [. . .]. God’s words “let my people go!” is a command to come out of physical bondage to not only reclaim our bodies but also to rebuild a broken black humanity that includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. (84, 85)

Monroe thus reminds us that the path of *phantasie* can lead to some destructive byways if readers of the Bible are unmindful of the interlocking, multiple axes of difference and privilege, and of

the fact that while working for one's own freedom one may still forge the chains that shackle another.

Revisioning and reclaiming specific biblical characters might be seen as one level of liberationist *phantasie*; revisioning and reclaiming a larger narrative that encompasses an expanded number of characters could then be termed a second level. Continuing this line of thought, the third level of *phantasie* involves not just revisioning and reclaiming a recognized larger narrative such as the Exodus story, but actually uncovering a larger narrative that remains "hidden" and unrecognized by the privileged "mainstream" culture. In the work of gay-friendly biblical interpretation, such a narrative has been uncovered; this hidden epic involves a class of people known as eunuchs. Castrated males who often served in royal courts, eunuchs are mentioned throughout the Old and New Testaments. Rather than see these references as scattered, unrelated nods to a phenomenon in ancient Middle Eastern culture, gay-friendly readers have connected these references, like pieces in a puzzle, and discovered a parallel to the contemporary lesbian and gay experience.

Some early allusions to eunuchs are found in the law of Moses; these references do not bode well for this class of people. Leviticus 21:16-20 bars a man who "hath his stones broken" from performing priestly duties; similarly, in Deuteronomy 23:1 a man "that is wounded in the stones" is refused admittance "into the congregation of the LORD." Under such strictures any eunuch would be a marked and marginalized man. Nancy Wilson has reflected on the position of eunuchs within a larger Old Testament context which takes into account Hebrew notions of immortality. Noting that the Hebrew Bible is "not very clear about any consistent concept of life after death" (120), Wilson observes that "for most of the duration of biblical Judaism, the primary way one could achieve any sense of 'immortality' was through one's descendants, one's

children. Through them, you, your life, and your people lived on.” Thus, by dying without leaving behind any children one could be seen as being cut off from one’s people; this could be the “worst fate that could befall someone in such a culture and religion” (121). Indeed, Wilson regards the entire book of Job as a meditation on this train of thought (121-22). When read in this larger biblical context, the proscriptions of Leviticus 21:16-20 and Deuteronomy 23:1 take on a greater seriousness, and the position of the eunuch becomes even more tenuous.

In light of the Mosaic laws applicable to the eunuch condition, the following promise from the book of Isaiah is that much more remarkable:

[. . .] neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I *am* a dry tree. For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose *the things* that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

According to the prophet, the eunuch—marginalized for his inability to partake in culturally approved heterosexual reproduction, and worried about being “cut off” from his culture and his community—will ultimately, if he is obedient and faithful to Yahweh, be granted a place of affirmation and honor. Nancy Wilson argues that this prophecy “is about the hope for future inclusion of those who were previously excluded from the worshiping community. Those who were outcasts and cut off because of their Gentile status or because of their sexuality will now be included.” And writing as a lesbian Christian, she adds that eunuchs “*are our gay, lesbian, and bisexual antecedents*” (124). Yet another twist in the eunuch grand narrative occurs in the book of Jeremiah. After angering the princes of Judah with his fatalistic preaching, the prophet Jeremiah is cast into a muddy dungeon, and becomes trapped in the deep mud (Jeremiah 38:1-6).

An Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-melech pleads on behalf Jeremiah to the king of Judah, and is given authorization to rescue the imprisoned prophet. Aware of Jeremiah's entrapment by the oozing mud, Ebed-melech improvises a rig made from cords and rags, and is able to free him. Thus demonstrating a potent combination of compassion, boldness, and ingenuity, Ebed-melech becomes the Bible's first eunuch hero. Despite the coldly clinical and marginalizing language of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah offer messages of hope and affirmation to the ancient eunuchs.

Significant writings about eunuchs also occur in the New Testament. Particularly intriguing is a teaching direct from Jesus himself. After discussing divorce with his disciples, Jesus declares, "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from *their* mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*" (Matthew 19:12). For John McNeill, this is a pivotal verse that ties together the strand of eunuch-related discourse that runs throughout the entire Bible. McNeill observes that the term "eunuch" is here used "not only in its literal sense—i.e., those who have been physically castrated—but also in a symbolic sense for all those who for various reasons do not marry and bear children." McNeill develops the metaphor further, noting that Jesus' first category of eunuchs—those who are so from birth—"is the closest description we have in the Bible of what we understand today as a homosexual." Reading Isaiah's promise to the eunuch in light of Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 19:12, McNeill concludes further that the earlier prophetic promise might also be applicable "to the homosexual" (64, 65). By attempting to "translate" the meaning of Matthew 19:12 from Jesus' ancient culture to a contemporary context, Chris Glaser comes to a reading of that verse much like that of McNeill: "Yesterday's eunuchs would be



roughly our equivalent today as outcasts and as non-procreationists. So Jesus may be indirectly speaking up for us.”<sup>84</sup> In fact, reading Matthew 1:19 in a metaphoric sense is not unique to gay-friendly readings; Jesus’ third category of eunuchs—those who have voluntarily become eunuch’s “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake”—has been interpreted as a figurative description of religious celibacy.<sup>85</sup> But two rhetorical moves—first, the inclusion of gay people within a larger metaphoric reading of the entire verse, and second, the connection of that metaphor to the Bible’s other eunuch texts—constitute pro-gay readers’ distinctive contribution to the interpretation of this cryptic teaching.

Jesus’ statement on the three varieties of eunuch is not the New Testament’s last word on the subject. The book of Acts includes a narrative about the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Jesus (Acts 8:26-40). The unnamed eunuch is described as “a man of Ethiopia,” as well as a eunuch “of great authority” in the service of the Ethiopian queen (v. 27). After Philip preaches to the Ethiopian eunuch, the man responds. “See, *here* is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Philip responds, noting that there is no hindrance: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” Philip thus performs the baptism, after which the eunuch goes “on his way rejoicing” (vv. 36-39). Nancy Wilson describes this narrative as “the real capstone” in the

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<sup>84</sup> From the August 23 entry in Glaser’s book of gay-friendly meditations on the Bible, *The Word Is Out*. Glaser’s equivalence of gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as “non-procreationists” is problematic in that many individuals in each group do indeed procreate, sometimes with such help as donor sperm or pregnancy surrogates; perhaps Glaser’s term “non-procreationists,” in this context, might be expanded to “non-procreationists and those who procreate in non-traditional ways.”

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Duling 1892 n. 19:12 and McAfee 206.

“chain of prophecy and fulfillment” surrounding the Bible’s eunuchs (129). To review this “chain”:

Leviticus 21:16-20 and Deutonomy 23:1—Any men with damaged reproductive organs are excluded from full participation in the religious life of the Hebrew community; in gay-positive *phantasie*, such excluded men are a prototype for lesbians and gay men, who similarly have been marked as “other” and excluded because of a perceived defect in their sexual being.

Isaiah 56:3-5—Despite the marginalizing language of the Mosaic law, Yahweh himself promises affirmation and inclusion to those eunuchs who live their lives in faithful covenant with him; in gay-positive *phantasie*, this promise is extended to lesbians and gay men.

Jeremiah 38:7-13—Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch, rescues the imprisoned prophet Jeremiah, thereby modeling the life of a faithful and righteous eunuch; in gay-positive *phantasie*, Ebed-melech becomes a spiritual ancestor for contemporary sexual minorities.

Matthew 19:12—Jesus acknowledges that while some eunuchs are made so be men, others are eunuchs from birth; in gay-positive *phantasie*, the category of eunuchs from birth is a metaphor for lesbians and gay men who accept their sexual orientation as intrinsic to their being.

Acts 8:26-39—Evangelized by Philip, an Ethiopian eunuch accepts the message of Christ and is baptized in his name; in gay-positive *phantasie*, this baptism represents the culmination of the grand narrative of biblical eunuchs, and is a text of hope for contemporary sexual minorities.

Reflecting on this “chain” of eunuch texts, Wilson writes with outrage that the story of Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is not cross-referenced with either Isaiah’s prophecy of the eunuchs or the story of Ebed-melech “in *any* Bible or standard commentary! These are the politics of biblical interpretation at their most subtle and at their worst. Such gross omission and silence obscure the possible relationship of these passages” (128). Wilson finds this “*eunuch phobia*” particularly galling in light of the work of Bible commentators “who spend paragraphs on obscure and remote associations,” yet never link these two Ethiopian eunuchs (129). Wilson’s complaint echoes Justin Tanis’ observation that the Jesus who directs a slur against a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 was not the image of Jesus that he was taught in Sunday school. Together, these testimonies of Wilson and Tanis point out an overarching fact: the Bible is a vast compendium of characters, prophecies, and narrative episodes; these individual building blocks have traditionally been packaged and presented by authoritative bodies (denominations, established publishing houses, etc). in authoritative formats (sermons, annotated editions of the Bible, etc.) that, more often than not, function in the service of privilege, and at the expense of marginalized individuals and communities. Biblical *phantasie* thus, at its most revolutionary, rearranges and re-presents these “building blocks” in fresh and empowering ways.

Dorothee Sölle developed her concept of *Phantasie* in her 1968 theological study *Phantasie und Gehorsam: Überlegungen zu einer künftigen christlichen Ethik*.<sup>86</sup> For her,

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<sup>86</sup> *Phantasie und Gehorsam* was included in Sölle’s *Gesammelte Werke, Band 3*. The English-language history of *Phantasie und Gehorsam* is also worth noting. A translation by Lawrence W Denef, with the title *Beyond Mere Obedience*, was published by the Pilgrim Press in 1982; oddly, the author’s name was rendered “Dorothee Soelle” on the book’s cover and title page, although “Dorothee Sölle” did appear on the copyright page. This translation, slightly

*phantasie* is not restricted to certain individuals; rather, it “is a form of freedom which anyone can achieve in her lifetime” (51). She adds that *phantasie* “has always been in love with fulfillment. It conceives of some new possibility and repeatedly bursts the boundaries which limit people, setting free those who have submitted themselves to these boundaries” (56). Sölle’s words—written long after the abolitionists had achieved victory in their cause, but before the blossoming of gay philosophy and activism let loose in the aftermath of the Stonewall uprising—seem nonetheless to resonate with relevance for both of these movements. Both the abolitionists and contemporary gay rights activists have certainly focused on the freedom and fulfillment of oppressed human beings. But beyond that, the activists in each camp who have turned their eyes towards the Bible have also helped to free that cultural touchstone text from an isolating pedestal. The *phantasie* of writers like Harriet Jacobs, Irene Monroe, and Nancy Wilson declares that the right to interpret Bible does not belong solely to an elite fraternity in the service of privileged interests, but also to those who have been pushed to the margins of society.

### **“I WANT TO ADD MY TESTIMONY”: LIBERATIONIST HERMENEUTICS AND THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED**

The seventh and final common characteristic of liberationist hermeneutics is its privileging of the voice of the marginalized. When considering the axes of difference and privilege around which American culture has been, and sometimes still is, organized—slave/free, male/female, rich/poor, etc.—those who adopt a progressive, liberatory approach to the Bible

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revised, was reissued in 1995 by the same publisher under a new title: *Creative Disobedience*. The citations in this chapter are taken from *Creative Disobedience*.

have claimed that there is a special value to the testimonies of those who are disadvantaged by these organizing dichotomies. This attention to the voices of the marginalized is seen within the abolitionist movement by its championing of a special subgenre of abolitionist literature—the slave narrative. First-person accounts of slavery by former slaves, slave narratives ranged in size and format from short interviews to book-length texts written by literate former slaves themselves. White abolitionists who had never known the sting of the slavemaster’s lash themselves recognized the power and value of these first-person accounts, consequently, many of these white abolitionists poured their own efforts into editing, promoting, and providing forewords to them.

William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to Frederick Douglass’ groundbreaking 1845 *Narrative* exemplifies the abolitionist movement’s valuing of the slave voice. In this preface Garrison recalls hearing Douglass speak at an 1841 anti-slavery convention in Nantucket:

I shall never forget his first speech at the convention—the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind—the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise—the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think that I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever. (34)

Garrison’s words are certainly a tribute to Douglass’ oratorical skills. But beyond that, Garrison recognizes that it is the innate authority of Douglass’ words—an authority born of lived experience—that adds so powerfully to the abolitionist argument. Garrison’s confidence in the authority of Douglass’ words is such that he asserts that these words, put into print form and thus

separated from Douglass' oratorical skill, will lose no power. Of the written *Narrative* Garrison declares, "He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit,—without being filled with an unutterable abhorrence of slavery and all its abettors, and animated with a determination to seek the immediate overthrow of that execrable system [. . .] must have a flinty heart" (38). Garrison thus believes that the unique power and authority of Douglass' words not only to generate strong emotion in his readers, but to actually inspire them to activism.

Abolitionist writers like Garrison heralded slave narratives not only for their power to move people, but even more importantly for their revelation of truth—truth that might otherwise remain unknown. Consider Lydia Maria Child's introduction to the original 1861 printing of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>87</sup> Jacobs' memoir, one of the seminal slave narratives written from the perspective of the woman slave, cast a searing light on the sexual exploitation of black women within the slave system. Child, acknowledging the explosive nature of the revelations in Jacobs' memoir, offers an apologia to the reader: "I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and well-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate" (3-4). Nonetheless, Child does not back down from endorsing Jacobs' text, and in particular, the text's exposé of the psychosexual ugliness of the slave system: "This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn" (4). The actual voice of a woman who has been personally victimized by this "monstrous" phenomenon is critical to ripping away of the veil of secrecy. Like Garrison, Child hopes that by this first-person voice will inspire the activism that leads to real

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<sup>87</sup> Child is also credited as editor of the original 1861 publication.

societal change. Of her own efforts to help bring Jacobs' memoir to the public Child writes, "I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage [. . .]. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery" (4). Throughout her introduction to *Incidents*, Child continually testifies of the special truth and power of this memoir, and thereby exemplifies the abolitionist impulse to privilege the voice of the ex-slave.

Those abolitionists who had never themselves experienced slavery also recognized the ability of the ex-slave's own voice to humanize the slave population in the minds of the general public. Certainly, white novelists and poets like Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Greenleaf Whittier used their talents to create fictional slave voices in an attempt to humanize this oppressed class of people. In his 1838 poem "The Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother to Her Daughters Sold into Southern Bondage," for example, Whittier uses a first-person voice to try to express the anguish felt by the title character:

Gone, gone,—sold and gone,  
To the rice-swamp dank and lone.  
There no mother's eye is near them,  
There no mother's ear can hear them  
. . . . .  
From Virginia's hills and waters;  
Woe is me, my stolen daughters! (56)

Such a poem, much like the first-person protestations of the slave characters in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is designed to appeal to the sympathy of northern whites and others by emphasizing a facet of common humanity—in this case, maternal love—which the target

audience shares with slaves. But as effective as these fictional characters were, abolitionists nonetheless recognized the power of authentic slave voices to put human faces on the subject of slavery. Consider William Lloyd Garrison's further musing on Frederick Douglass' 1841 convention speech: "There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy [. . .]—yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave, trembling for his safety" (34). Such was the impact of hearing testimony from Douglass' own lips. Abolitionists like Garrison and Child, through their promotion of authentic slave narratives, indicated their belief in the special value of such first-person voices to their cause.

Although supported, respectively, by the testimonials of Garrison and Child, Douglass and Jacobs also boldly expressed in their own words their belief in the unique value of their first-person narratives. Jacobs' throws the gauntlet down in her own preface to *Incidents*: "Reader, be assured that this narrative is no fiction [. . .]. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations" (1, 2). Douglass also reflects on the fact that the real experience of having been enslaved enables the ex-slave to shed real truth on the controversial institution. The value of that experience is made clear when Douglass discusses a particularly misunderstood facet of slave culture: "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake." Having attacked the error, Douglass reveals the painful truth, as seen through the prism of his own life in bondage:



Slaves sing most when they are unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singling of a slave; the songs of one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion. (58)

Douglass demonstrates that the privileged person—the free man or woman who has never experienced enslavement—can try to “read” the signifiers of slave life, and yet completely misinterpret them; moreover, his critique implies that such acts of misreading can serve the propaganda aims of the anti-abolitionists. Together with Jacobs, Douglass affirms the need for the voice of the marginalized—i.e., of the enslaved and the previously enslaved—to be heard in the debate over slavery.

This special valuing of the voice of the marginalized within the abolitionist movement ultimately ties into the practice of abolitionist hermeneutics. By helping to promote a “space” for voices like those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to be heard, William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child also help clear that space for these writers’ critiques of institutional Christianity and of pro-slavery hermeneutics; a space is further cleared for these ex-slave writers to demonstrate their own way of rhetorically accessing the Bible. Frederick Douglass vigorously inhabits this space in his *Narrative*:

The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who

robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation [. . .]. The Christianity of America is a Christianity, of whose votaries it may be as truly said, as it was of the ancient scribes and Pharisees, “They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.” (154, 155)

Note Douglass’ quoting of one of Jesus’ discourses (Matthew 23:4) as he develops his argument against the Christendom of the slaveholding south. The irony of Douglass’ words lies in the fact that, for anti-abolitionist interpreters of the Bible, Douglass, as an escapee from slavery, was himself living in open defiance of direct biblical commands. But in the abolitionist world, the voices of Douglass and of others who had experienced enslavement were acknowledged and respected.

Just as the witness of those who had actually experienced enslavement was valued in abolitionist biblical hermeneutics, so to is the witness of those who have been marginalized by heterosexism valued in gay-affirmative hermeneutics. As in abolitionist literature, this affirmation happens on two levels: first, the endorsement of these marginalized voices by a voice from the privileged demographic (such as in free white Garrison’s preface to the memoir of black fugitive slave Douglass), and second, the marginalized voice’s first-person defense of his or her own witness. In her book *More Than Welcome*, Maurine Waun exemplifies the first of these levels. An ordained United Methodist pastor, Waun writes from the perspective of a woman who enjoys the privilege that comes with living a heterosexual life, but who chooses to engage with sexual minorities and who values the witness of the voices she has heard in this engagement. Waun tells the story of an interview she conducted, as part of a theology school

project, with an openly gay Christian man who was also an ordained minister, and who had suffered the consequences of anti-gay policy within his denomination. The first-person witness which this man, identified only as “John,” offered to her impacted her profoundly: “The wounds caused by the violence done to him by other Christians were healing even as he told me his story; even as, in the telling, his words caused new wounds in me.” But John’s testimony does more than merely “wound” Waun: “It is the pain and injustice of John, and many others whose stories I would hear, that would eventually grow and culminate in a transformation and passion in my own life around the issue of homosexuality” (13). Waun’s description of the transformative power of John’s words is reminiscent of William Lloyd Garrison’s account of the impact of Frederick Douglass’ presentation at the 1841 anti-slavery convention; in each case, a member of the privileged demographic is inspired to activism by the authentic witness of one who has suffered the real consequences of unjust discrimination. Waun also echoes the concern, expressed by Lydia Maria Child, that some aspects of the system of injustice at hand have been “veiled” from those who need to know the full truth. Observing that clergy “are most often totally unaware of those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, because those people are silent,” Waun considers the human price of such silence: “[T]he quiet, invisible one is utterly alone in his or her pain. The congregation is not in a position of either receiving the special gift of truth that this person brings or being able to share freely the struggles that are brought together during corporate worship” (96). The invisibility of LGBT individuals within institutional Christendom, and consequently the absence of their authentic testimonies, not only harmfully isolates these marginalized individuals, but impoverishes the larger community.

If writers like Maurine Waun serve a function similar to that played by William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child in the abolitionist era—that is, as members of the privileged

demographic who champion the voices of the marginalized—then it is also true that there is a rich chorus of authentic witnesses from today’s marginalized sexual minorities. Many express sentiments similar to those of psychotherapist John E. Fortunato: “Gay and Christian. Cornerstones of who I am. And, though it hasn’t always been so, I’ve come to believe *both* are good” (1). With this declaration Fortunato validates the fullness of his identity, and prepares the reader for the fullness of his first-person testimony. Openly gay Episcopal priest Zalmon O. Sherwood also harmonizes his dual identity as gay and Christian in a deeply personal testimony—his 1987 memoir entitled *Kairos*. In an introductory “Author’s Note” to the main text of *Kairos*, Sherwood notes that liberation is “based on the heart, and it arises out of a critically examined, lived experience of oppression, above all, of the personal fight to assert one’s dignity” (12). With these words Sherwood assigns a special value to the experience of marginality, and of the struggle to impact society from the margins. As with the slave narrators, part of the power of contemporary gay voices to impact societal debate lies in the humanizing power of these first-person witnesses. John Boswell reflects on this process in his introduction to *Uncommon Calling*, the 1988 memoir by gay clergyman Chris Glaser: “One of the beauties of Chris Glaser’s story and life is that by choosing to be open and honest about his feelings he transforms ‘homosexual’ from an alien, despicable abstraction into a real, flesh-and-blood brother to other Christians.” Boswell goes on to note that, as a result of this first-person testimony, other Christians can see Glaser “as they cannot see an abstraction: see that he is one of them—a struggling, loving Christian human being, with the graces and flaws and failings of a fallen and redeemed people” (xviii). Glaser himself, in the prefatory acknowledgments to his 1998 theological study *Coming Out as Sacrament*, remarks how the power of gay witness impacted him: “I thank my teachers in the lesbian and gay community who taught me the nature

of coming out, including Reverend William Johnson, who was the first to demonstrate to me that one could even come out as a gay Christian minister” (ix). Glaser thus demonstrates that the witness of sexual minorities impacts not only potential allies among the heterosexually-identified, but also offers hope and affirmation to those lesbian and gay individuals who are on similar journeys.

I have noted above that in the world of abolitionist cultural production, the creation of platforms for the witness of the marginalized—that is, of African-Americans who had experienced enslavement—also helped create a space by which those voices might critique anti-abolitionist biblical hermeneutics, and also develop alternate ways of reading and revisioning the Bible. A parallel phenomenon occurs in the contemporary gay rights movement as it is practiced amongst people rooted in Judeo-Christian faith traditions. Consider Zalmon O. Sherwood’s defense of his integrity as a gay Christian: “I remain in the Church, because I remember that Jesus’ disciples consisted of those persons outside the traditional, established centers of social and economic power. The Church today will thrive only to the degree that it embraces, in their full humanity, those persons on the margins of life” (101). Sherwood’s claiming of Jesus as the minister to the marginalized, and thus as an icon for gay Christian activism, is the type of pro-gay biblical hermeneutics that goes hand-in-hand with an appreciation of the witness of the marginalized.

## **CASE STUDIES OF REACTIONARY HERMENEUTICS:**

### ***PRAYERS FOR BOBBY AND INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL***

Thus far in this chapter I have examined seven points of commonality between the biblical hermeneutics of the abolitionist movement and the contemporary gay rights movement. In addition to developing parallel methods of biblical hermeneutics, both abolitionist and pro-gay writers have also often made a point of critically examining the hermeneutical practices of the reactionary movements which respectively opposed them. By embarking on such analyses, liberationist writers have created “case studies” of reactionary hermeneutics, and of the pedagogies to which these hermeneutical practices are joined. A tandem reading of two such case studies—one found in the above-mentioned *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs, and one found in Leroy Aarons’ 1995 nonfiction book *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother’s Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son*—demonstrates further not only the parallel between abolitionist and pro-gay rhetoric on one hand, but between the anti-abolitionist and anti-gay movements on the other.

Each of these two books details the human toll of social systems which marginalize certain groups of people. Jacobs tells the story of her life in slavery, with a particular emphasis on the sexual harassment she endured from the man who owned her. *Incidents* also details the physically and psychologically grueling struggle she had to endure in order to escape from that terrible situation. In *Prayers*, journalist Aarons tells the story of Mary Griffith, a Christian fundamentalist whose relationship with her gay son, Bobby Griffith, was seriously damaged by her own adherence to anti-gay theology. After years of religious and psychological harassment from Mary, Bobby committed suicide; this tragedy led Mary to a reevaluation of her

most closely held beliefs. Whereas Aarons' "case study" of reactionary hermeneutics runs throughout *Prayers*, Jacobs' comparable case study is mostly concentrated in the memoir's thirteenth chapter, "The Church and Slavery" (68-75); this chapter includes Jacobs' reproduction of a sermon preached at a slave audience on behalf of the slaves' masters (68-69). Separated by more than a century, these two case studies nonetheless hit many common points.

In each book, the author looks at a very personal domestic struggle over difference, obedience, and biblical interpretation and demonstrates the connection of this localized conflict to a larger "culture war." In Harriet Jacobs' case, she struggled against Dr. Flint, her white owner who demanded her obedience in all things, including his sexual demands, and who claimed a biblical mandate for this demand. Mary Griffith's conflict with her son Bobby also involved the intersection of religion and authority. After her son revealed his homosexuality to her, Mary spent years living in a state of anxiety that stemmed from her religious convictions: "The Bible repeatedly warned that homosexuality is a mortal sin; clearly gay people were doomed to perdition. If Bobby did not repent and change, there would be no reunion in heaven" (15). For both Dr. Flint and Mary Griffith, however, the immediate struggle with an errant member of the household was linked to a bigger struggle. In Dr. Flint's case, the larger struggle involved anti-slavery ideology. The slave rebellion led by Nat Turner awakened Dr. Flint and his fellow slaveowners to the fact that this ideology had taken root not only in the North, but also on Southern soil, and threatened to spread among their own slaves. Jacobs writes that "[a]fter the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had subsided, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters" (68). Mary Griffith also looked with great interest at an immediate cultural upheaval which directly connected to the upheaval in her home. Mary's

cultural touchstone was the fight led by entertainer Anita Bryant against the gay rights ordinance passed in Dade County, Florida:

Mary watched Anita Bryant with frank admiration. Her own vague fear of homosexuality was being articulated by a powerful and devout Christian, an admired public figure. So, when the Dade County gay rights ordinance was repealed by a vote of two to one in June 1977, Mary naturally approved. Bryant's victory speech was a declaration of war against homosexuals, who, she said, are "dangerous to the sanctity of the family, dangerous to our children, dangerous to our survival as one nation under God." (54)

The impact of Bryant's ideology and activism on Griffith had profound implications for her family. As did Dr. Flint more than a century earlier, Mary Griffith found her own home to be a "front" of a nation-wide culture war.

So embroiled in their respective cultural struggles, Dr. Flint and Mary Griffith chose a common tactic: each sought out a Christian authority figure as an ally in the fight to control a real or potential insurgency within his/her home. In Dr. Flint's case, he and his fellow slaveowners turned to Mr. Pike, an Episcopal clergyman who offered to provide special services for the slaves. The purpose of the services was to deliver an educational program that would make the slaves more obedient, and thus less inclined towards rebellion. Mary turned to one of the seminal figures in the contemporary anti-gay movement: writer Tim LaHaye, an evangelical Christian activist who is still active in the "culture war" against secular America.<sup>88</sup> Aarons

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<sup>88</sup> LaHaye has made a significant impact as co-author, with Jerry B. Jenkins, of the "Left Behind" books, a series of novels which envision the future of humanity in light of the eschatology of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity. In a 2004 opinion piece, Nicholas D.



writes that while seeking out resources on homosexuality, Mary came across one of LaHaye's books.<sup>89</sup> Like Mary Griffith, LaHaye was an ardent admirer of Anita Bryant; he declared her

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Kristof notes that these books "are the best-selling novels for adults in the United States, and they have sold more than 60 million copies worldwide." Reflecting on the twelfth volume in the series, *Glorious Appearing*, Kristof writes that the plot "has Jesus returning to Earth to wipe all non-Christians from the planet. It's disconcerting to find ethnic cleansing celebrated as the height of piety." In a 2002 review of the tenth volume in the series, Michelle Goldberg considers the books in sociopolitical context, noting that

these books and their massive success deserve attention if only for what they tell us about the core beliefs of a great many people in this country, people whose views shape the way America behaves in the world [. . .]. The Left Behind series provides a narrative and a theological rationale for a whole host of perplexing conservative policies, from the White House's craven decision to cut off aid to the United Nations Family Planning Fund to America's surreally casual mobilization for an invasion of Baghdad—a city that is, in the Left Behind books, Satan's headquarters.

Not content with merely evangelizing an adult audience with their fundamentalist fiction, LaHaye and Jenkins also collaborated to produce a spin-off series of novels geared towards a teen audience. Under the umbrella title "Left Behind—The Kids," this spin-off series eventually grew to an astonishing forty volumes. All of the "Left Behind" and "Left Behind—The Kids" books are available for purchase via the Web site of Tim LaHaye Ministries.

<sup>89</sup> Aarons 79. The exact title of this particular book is not given, but it was very likely LaHaye's 1978 volume *The Unhappy Gays: What Everyone Should Know about Homosexuality*. The book was also issued in 1980 under the shortened title *What Everyone Should Know about Homosexuality*. Later in *Prayers* Aarons mentions a book entitled *What Parents Should Know about Homosexuality*, which he attributes to LaHaye (84). I have found no record of a book by that precise title; I believe that this may actually be a reference to either *The Unhappy Gays* or its alternately titled reissue, since the full title of each book is very similar to the title Aarons cites. All the quotes from LaHaye in this present work are from *The Unhappy Gays*.

deserving of “the admiration and thanks of every Christian American for her courageous fight against homosexuality in her community” (LaHaye 152), and he backed her activism with his own. LaHaye painted an overwhelmingly negative stereotype of homosexuality in his writing: “By no stretch of the imagination can anyone be helped or improved in life by adopting a homosexual life style. Clearly it is ungodly, vile, against nature, and shameful” (109). Backed by such authority figures, Dr. Flint and Mary Griffith moved their homefront campaigns forward.

Each of the two case studies depicts what might be termed “reeducation sessions” delivered to the marginalized individual(s) over whom the dominant party seeks greater control. Both Jacobs and Aarons offer intriguing details about the specific tactics used in these sessions. Consider Jacobs’ description of Mr. Pike’s entrance into his designated classroom: “When Mr. Pike came, there were some twenty persons present. The reverend gentleman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave out the portions he wished them to read or respond to” (68). Mr. Pike has been provided with a literally “captive” audience of slaves who are required by their owners to receive his tutelage. As Jacobs shows, he is in total command of this scenario; he decides and directs which texts upon which his students will focus, and delivers a sermon (68-69) which reaffirms his core themes. Jacobs notes further that Mr. Pike’s attempts to control his audience’s intellectual development extends beyond the physical and temporal borders of his classroom; at the conclusion of his sermon he issues the following orders: “‘When you go from here, don’t stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come’” (69). Mr. Pike’s pedagogical style exemplifies what Paulo Freire has called “the ‘banking’ concept of education,” in which education “becomes the act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of

communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (53). In Mr. Pike’s case, this attempt at “banking” is employed with the intention of making his audience more obedient in their roles as slaves. Compare Mr. Pike’s class to a session held in the Griffith home, as seen through the eyes of Bobby Griffiths’ cousin Jeanette: “Jeanette witnessed an intense discussion about her cousin’s homosexuality that took place in the Griffith living room. She and Bobby were on the couch, with the rest of the family ranged around the room, her Uncle Bob watching in silence. Mary stood in the center like a teacher, her hand gesturing” (87). At this point, Mary begins to quote from the Bible. In this account, Mary is, like Mr. Pike, in a power position from which she controls the pedagogical agenda. Aarons enriches his account of Mary Griffith’s “teaching” style by including the perspective of Andrea, a friend of Bobby’s sister Joy. According to Andrea, Mary and Joy functioned as a “religious tag team” who would “corral” Bobby. As reported by Aarons, Andrea observed further, “[W]hat I saw was fanaticism, religious rantings and ravings, well into the night. I saw the hammering away, the chiseling of his soul” (91). Bobby is not meant to be a true participant in a dialogue; like the slaves in Jacobs’ community, he is the object of a program designed to bring his behavior into conformity with a standard imposed on him by a privileged caste. Bobby’s situation reflects Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking” style of education, in which “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (53). For both Jacobs’ fellow slaves and Bobby Griffith, critical thought was discouraged by their “teacher”; the students’ role was simply to listen, to internalize, and to obey.

In each of the two case studies, the “banking” style of pedagogy is significantly invested in negative stereotypes of the marginalized group of people being targeted. Consider this excerpt from Pike’s sermon:

Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master’s substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag [. . .]. O, the depravity of your hearts! (69)

Pike loads up his discourse with the type of anti-black stereotypes also promoted by such anti-abolitionist writers as Howell Cobb, Samuel How, and Samuel Cartwright—together they paint an overall picture of black people as depraved, lazy, superstitious, and prone to addictive behaviors.<sup>90</sup> Such discourse, when directed towards a black slave audience, furthers the message that they need to accept the strictures of pro-slavery Christianity for their own well-being. The use of such dehumanizing stereotypes also factored into the pedagogy which Mary Griffith directed at her son Bobby. Aarons notes that Griffiths pushed one of anti-gay writer Tim LaHaye’s books upon Bobby, and that the book<sup>91</sup> harped upon the alleged “excesses of gay people” (84, 85). In light of Bobby Griffith’s ultimate suicide, it is disturbing to look at LaHaye’s own words. Among the defining characteristics of gay life, LaHaye lists loneliness,

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<sup>90</sup> See my comments on the use of stereotype by Cobb, How, and Cartwright in Chapter Three of this present work.

<sup>91</sup> Aarons gives the book’s title as *What Parents Should Know about Homosexuality*; see my comments in note 89 above.

extreme sexual promiscuity, alienation from God, selfishness, hostility, and deceit (41-59). He is particularly pointed in his accusation regarding that final characteristic: “In fact, most homosexuals are the best liars you will ever meet. Their tactics of distortion or evasion are almost impeccable. They have learned the art of deception so well they can look you straight in the eye and tell a barefaced lie while maintaining a look of complete innocence” (44). In keeping with his anti-gay stereotyping, LaHaye puts forward Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky as a “model” of homosexual life. Reflecting on the speculation that the great Russian composer had committed suicide, LaHaye writes, “Tchaikovsky is just one in a parade of notorious homosexuals whose lives were stalked by tragedy, sadness, and despair. Only God knows how many of the more ordinary homosexuals have lived tortured lives and died prematurely” (59). Like Mr. Pike, Mary Griffith’s mentor LaHaye offers a “cure” to the ills that he sketches; in each case, that solution is obedience within the context of reactionary Christianity.

Another common characteristic of the pedagogies of Mr. Pike and Mary Griffith is the use of biblical prooftexting. The verse around which Pike builds his sermon is Ephesians 6:5, a favorite of anti-abolitionist activists. Mary Griffith bombarded her son with comparable texts: “She began pinning Bible verses targeted to Bobby’s ‘condition’ around the house, even over the bathroom mirror [. . .]. Again and again, she drove home the dictum that homosexuals are cast out of God’s kingdom” (83). One related exchange between Mary and Bobby is particularly poignant:

“This is what the Bible says,” she exhorted, launching into a recitation of Scripture.

“You won’t bend, will you?” Bobby said wearily.

“Bobby, I can’t erase these words from the Bible,” Mary said. (87)

Connected to Mr. Pike's and Mary Griffith's use of the Bible in their pedagogy was the reactionary Christian concept of Satan. Consider the opening of Mr. Pike's sermon: "Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways" (68-69). For Mr. Pike and other anti-abolitionists, rebelliousness on the part of slaves was a manifestation of Satan's influence on earth—a manifestation that needed to be confronted with the power of the Bible. Mary Griffith had a similar concept of the Christian arch-fiend: "She used the Bible and its verses—one for every occasion—as sentinels against the fearsome agents of Satan, who she knew must be contriving to infiltrate her comfortable suburban bubble" (43). As Aarons writes, the connection between homosexuality and Satan was likely strengthened in Mary Griffith's mind by the work of Tim LaHaye<sup>92</sup>: "He warned of Satan's fatal clutch, of how he could take on the guise of 'an angel of light' and establish a mental and emotional hold on a child" (84). Thus, for Christians like Mr. Pike and Mary Griffith, the act of "teaching" an insurgent subaltern becomes something greater—it becomes a faithful disciple's act of combat with Satan himself.

The "banking"-type pedagogy employed by Mr. Pike and Mary Griffith is ultimately geared towards making the student a more obedient subject of his or her respective system of

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<sup>92</sup> In *The Unhappy Gays* LaHaye even speculates on the possible link between homosexuality and demonic possession:

No doubt some homosexuals are indeed demon possessed. I have seen demonstrations of militant homosexuals who appeared abnormally "possessed." Sexual excesses claimed by some homosexuals seem so abnormal that they may well be motivated by demons. Certainly any person who willfully defies God and his laws for a protracted period of time is vulnerable to demon possession. (141)

difference, power, and domination. But such a pedagogy is not without its risk to such systems; Paulo Freire writes:

Those who use the banking approach, knowingly or unknowingly [. . .], fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality. But, sooner or later, these contradictions may lead formerly passive students to turn against their domestication and the attempt to domesticate reality. They may discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human. (56)

At the time of her tutelage by Mr. Pike, Harriet Jacobs had already turned against the anti-abolitionist pedagogy of the South's institutional Christianity. She notes with acidic irony that she left the religious service "highly amused at brother Pike's gospel teaching" (69). Jacobs not only rejects the pedagogical authority of Mr. Pike, but she also declares that the slaveowners whose interests he serves are the ones who truly need an authentic gospel education. She offers the following challenge to missionaries who "send the Bible to the heathen abroad": "Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that no man has the right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother" (73). With this exhortation Jacobs subverts the pedagogical paradigm of slaveholding Christendom by declaring that slaveholders need to be "evangelized" and awakened to a respect for basic human rights.

What gave Harriet Jacobs the intellectual insight and the emotional fortitude to thus resist the pedagogical tactics of Mr. Pike and his ilk? Jacobs notes that Pike was not her only source of religious instruction; in fact, she benefitted from exposure to parties who offered an alternative

hermeneutical vision. She notes in particular one white minister who was particularly humane in the sermons he delivered to the slave population; among this man's teachings was that "God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins" (72). Such a statement contrasts sharply with Mr. Pike's harping on anti-black stereotypes. Regarding the progressive preacher's declaration of God's color-blindness, Jacobs writes, "This was strange doctrine from a southern pulpit. It was very offensive to slaveholders. They said he and his wife had made fools of their slaves, and that he preached like a fool to the negroes" (72). Jacobs also discusses the significance of religious music among the enslaved population, observing that the "slaves generally compose their own songs and hymns" (70). In fact, slave hymns evolved into a mechanism by which enslaved African-Americans subverted the hermeneutics of the slaveowners. Jacobs includes a sample verse from a slave song:

"Old Satan is one busy ole man;  
He rolls dem blocks all in my way.  
But Jesus is my bosom friend;  
He rolls dem blocks away." (70)

Although Jacobs does not explicitly state so, such lyrics could be read as carrying a subtle abolitionist/anti-slavery message. Jacobs' exposure to such subversive influences certainly may have helped form the inner core that allowed her to resist and defy the intense religious conditioning imposed on the slave population by the slaveowning class and its ecclesiastic allies. The progressive preacher affirmed the dignity and humanity of black slaves; the tradition of black slave music gave a voice to the members of this oppressed community. But did Bobby Griffith benefit from similar liberatory influences? Although he seemed to have "flirted with a few gay organizations" (170), their impact was evidently not enough to counteract the



overwhelming psychological assault which his mother and sister inflicted upon him. Aarons notes that, after witnessing one of the Griffith family “education” sessions, Bobby’s cousin Jeanette reflected, “A family is supposed to be about love, and they’re crucifying Bobby with their words” (87). This “crucifixion” culminated when Bobby Griffith committed suicide by jumping from a freeway bridge into the path of an oncoming truck (172). Aarons notes, “That he chose a peculiarly brutal death, one that would shatter his body, is emblematic of how he felt about himself” (171). The following comments from Mary Griffith’s mentor Tim LaHaye are particularly chilling in light of Bobby’s ultimate fate:

Although there is no way of positively verifying it, I can believe the suggestion that homosexuals account for 50 percent of America’s suicides [. . .]. The tremendous rejection homosexuals experience inevitably brings them to depression at a rate many times higher than that of a straight community. Nothing causes suicide more than depression. (58)

Of course, LaHaye does not consider the fact that the impact of authority figures like himself upon homosexuals and their families may have a causative influence upon these risks for depression and suicide. In the end, Harriet Jacobs and Bobby Griffiths represent two very different responses to reactionary systems of biblical hermeneutics and religious pedagogy. The pro-slavery system under which Jacobs was tutored was designed to make her into an obedient slave; the tutelage failed, and Jacobs ultimately defied her master, escaped the slave system, and became an outspoken activist in the cause of abolition. The system under which Bobby Griffith was tutored was designed to make him renounce the homosexual lifestyle and, by adhering to the obedience of Christian discipleship, refrain from ever engaging in homosexual acts or seeking

romantic love with another man. This tutelage also failed, but its failure was very different than that in Harriet Jacobs' case; the end result was the complete destruction of a human life.

In their respective case studies of reactionary hermeneutics and pedagogy, Jacobs and Aarons reflect not only upon the influence of these phenomena on the oppressed group, but also on the relationship of these cultural constructs to those who promote them. In Jacobs' case, she reproduces a telling conversation between herself (here referred to as "Linda," reflecting the pseudonym under which *Incidents* was originally published) and her owner, Dr. Flint. The exchange alludes both to Dr. Flint's own religious conversion and to his ongoing attempts to secure Jacobs' sexual compliance:

"You would do well to join the church too, Linda."

"There are sinners enough in it already," rejoined I. "If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad."

"You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife," he replied.

I answered that the Bible didn't say so. (74-75)

Is Dr. Flint's promise that, in complying with him sexually, Linda/Harriet could still be "virtuous" an allusion to the Old Testament practice by which patriarchs, favored of God, enjoyed sexual relations with their female slaves?<sup>93</sup> Whether or not this was the case, his slave's response—"the Bible didn't say so"—indicates that she has not only rejected the hermeneutics

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<sup>93</sup> Most notably in the case of Abram (Abraham) and his slave Hagar (Genesis 16), a story which contained one of the anti-abolitionist movement's critical proof-texts (vv. 6-9); see my comments on this story, and on the anti-abolitionist use of it, in Chapter Three of this present work.

and pedagogy of the slaveowners, but that she, like the slaves who composed insurgent hymn lyrics, claims for herself the authority to interpret the Bible in ways that further her own agenda. Jacobs also records Flint's response to this bold statement of defiance: "His voice became hoarse with rage. 'How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!' he exclaimed. 'What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn't like? I am your master, and you shall obey me'" (75). Dr. Flint not only rejects the right of "Linda" to interpret the Bible for herself, but also reasserts the authority he claims as her master. Jacobs immediately follows this exchange, and thereby concludes this chapter of her book, with a further note of irony: "No wonder the slaves sing,—'Ole Satan's church is here below;/ Up to God's free church I hope to go'" (75). Jacobs' interpretation of this lyric is clear: "Satan's church" is the religious establishment of the southern slaveowners and their allies—of Dr. Flint, of Mr. Pike; she rejects this church and its use of the Bible.

As noted above, Dr. Flint responds with fury to Harriet Jacobs' rejection of pro-slavery hermeneutics. His response to Harriet's escape from enslavement is equally negative; she writes that he prepared a wanted poster about her which "was posted at every corner, and in every public place for miles around." The poster warned, "All persons are forbidden, under penalty of the law, to harbor or employ said slave" (97). It is ironic that when faced with such an extreme act of rebellion, Dr. Flint relies on the authority structure of the slaveholding system—in this case, the laws governing free persons' interaction with fugitive slaves—as a tool by which he hopes to recover his human property. Like Dr. Flint, Mary Griffith loses the individual whom she tried to remold in the image of Christian obedience; however her loss is of a tragically permanent nature.

Unlike Dr. Flint, however, Mary does not continue to cling to the ideology of domination by which she had sought to “tame” the one she lost. Rather, the suicide of her son sets her upon a journey of discovery and personal transformation. Aarons writes that in addition to being tormented by the loss of Bobby, Mary became obsessed “with unearthing within the Bible some citation, a strand of proof that Bobby was part of God’s creation, that his way of life was compatible with God’s law, that he was not burning in hellfire” (63). As part of her search, Mary turned to the nearest branch of the Metropolitan Community Churches (108), a gay-friendly Christian denomination which has, since its founding, taught that an active homosexual life is compatible with Christianity; the denomination both ordains openly gay clergy and sanctions blessings of same-sex unions.<sup>94</sup> Ironically, Tim LaHaye had condemned this denomination as the “church of Sodom,” and warned of the “damage” it threatened to do “to the Kingdom of God and our culture” (186). The fact that Mary would enter the sanctuary of a church condemned by the very man whose written counsel she had both taken and sought to foist upon Bobby marked a radical shift in her thinking. The pastor of the congregation shared with Mary an alternative interpretation of one biblical narrative particularly relied on by Tim LaHaye—the story of the destruction of Sodom. Aarons writes, “Mary was stunned. The possibility of an alternative view of the Bible was, in itself, a major revelation.” Aarons notes further that the grieving mother “felt cheated” that such a perspective had not been made

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas L.P. Swicegood documented the early history of Metropolitan Community Churches (often abbreviated MCC) in his 1974 book *Our God Too*. The history of the denomination is further explored in the 1990 volume *Don’t Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*, coauthored by MCC founder Troy Perry and Swicegood. Additional information on MCC may be found at the denomination’s Internet site <<http://www.mccchurch.org>>.

available in her own church (110). With this revelation behind her, Mary began to scrutinize the Bible “with newly critical eyes” (106). One of the texts so opened to a fresh reading was Deuteronomy 22:18, which prescribes death by stoning to rebellious sons: “Stone a rebellious child to death? Mary struggled with this notion [. . .]. To think that God commanded such a child be put to death! Mary heard herself intoning, ‘I don’t believe that’” (106-07). Mary Griffith had thus adopted the mantle of resistant reader—the active participant who questions the assumptions and commonplaces that undergird a given text. As Mary continued her re-exploration of the Bible, she came to ironically identify with a New Testament figure to whom is attributed some of the passages most often used to promote anti-gay theology. But Mary re-read the story of the Apostle Paul with a new clarity. Mary focused on the narrative in Acts 22:3-11. This text describes how Paul, who had been persecuting the Christian community, is blinded by a divine light, and awakened to the error of his campaign of oppression. As recorded by Aarons, Mary Griffith declares,

I feel what the Apostle Paul must have felt on the road to Damascus when God pierced his conscience [. . .]. I did not know my soul; my conscience was in bondage to the people and ministers who stood in God’s stead. I went along in blind allegiance, unwittingly persecuting, oppressing gay and lesbian people—my own son. The scales of ignorance and fear that kept my soul in darkness have fallen from the eyes of my soul, my conscience. (147, 148)

With this epiphany Mary Griffith makes the leap into the practice of Dorothee Sölle’s *phantasie*—she has moved beyond mere resistant reading into a creative re-visioning of the text. The Apostle Paul is no longer a dour dispenser of anti-gay strictures, but rather a kindred spirit—a fallible man who was able to own his past error. Mary Griffith’s liberation from the

reactionary, absolutist biblical hermeneutics espoused by Tim LaHaye and other Christian Right leaders freed her to begin a new life of pro-gay activism—an activism rooted in her relationship with Bobby. As Aarons writes, “Mary had come to understand her mission. A wrong had been done and a life lost as a result. She was determined to right the injustice and save lives” (187). Her career as a public speaker on gay issues would lead her to a wide stage, with appearances on such nationally televised programs as *Oprah* and *Today* (206). Mary ultimately found the peace that had evaded her son, and she sought to share that peace with others.

Despite being separated by over a century, the case studies of reactionary hermeneutics and pedagogy contained in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Prayers for Bobby* demonstrate remarkable parallels between pro-slavery and anti-gay ideology and practice. To recapitulate these parallels:

- (1) Each case study shows how a domestic struggle over difference, privilege, and marginality is connected to a larger “culture war” over these issues.
- (2) In each case study, the lead figure in the home seeks out a Christian authority figure as a support in his/her effort to control the thought and behavior of an insurgent subaltern member of the household.
- (3) In each case study, a member of the dominant group (the dominant group consisting of white freemen in the first case, and heterosexuals in the second) engineers a pedagogical space in which he/she occupies a power position, and from which he/she tries to exercise further control over the subaltern insurgent.

- (4) In each case study, the chosen figure of Christian authority relies on negative stereotypes of the marginalized group at hand as part of his pedagogical and propagandistic agenda.
- (5) In each case study, the use of biblical proof-texting is central to the practice of reactionary pedagogy.
- (6) In each case, the practitioners of reactionary hermeneutics and pedagogy conceptualize and identify the Christian Devil as a primary engine of subaltern insurgency.
- (7) Each case study documents the ability of an alternative liberationist hermeneutic and pedagogy to counteract the reactionary praxis at hand.

Beyond these seven rather technical points of commonality, however, *Incidents* and *Prayers* share a greater moral common ground. Each book takes an unflinching look at a system by which some are marginalized, and even dehumanized, on the basis of core human characteristics; and each book posits an ethic by which each human being, freed from the unjust constraints of such an oppressive system, can grow more fully into the totality of his or her humanity.

### **THE LIBERATIONISTS' BIBLE: A REFLECTION**

In her introduction to an anthology of queer readings of the Bible, Mary Ann Tolbert makes the following observation:

The Word is powerful and powerfully dangerous. The text itself and the biases of those who read it have made the Bible something of a loose cannon in history,

with the potential to destroy as much to console and inspire. If lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered, and seeking people are to take back this word for themselves, they must take it back in a new way, a way that attempts to obviate its potential for harm while engaging its message of liberation and love. (xi)

Tolbert's warning of the potential of the Bible to destroy is certainly borne out in the stories told by many of those who have encountered the fruits of reactionary hermeneutics. Frederick Douglass, for example, showed how, armed with the sense of entitlement gained through such readings of the Bible, a slavemaster engaged in even more savage cruelty. Similarly, Leroy Aarons narrates how an adherence to anti-gay hermeneutics spurred a mother to psychologically torment her son until he finally committed suicide. But beyond such individual examples of inhumanity, reactionary hermeneutics also play out in the sphere of public policy. The adherents of anti-abolitionist hermeneutics supported the system of laws that allowed some Americans to hold others as slaves; today, those who read the Bible through an anti-gay lens also push policies that would deny a host of civil rights to gay and transgender people.

Tolbert's exhortation also brings to mind the words of poet Audre Lorde: "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (*Sister Outsider* 112). Again and again, both abolitionist and pro-gay writers have rejected the absolutist hermeneutics of reactionary Christian movements, and have instead forged the type of "new way" envisioned by Mary Ann Tolbert. In the preceding pages I have looked at seven components of this "new way": an appeal to a "Higher Law," an acknowledgement of the use of the Bible to justify human rights abuses, a challenge to the notion of a discrete and closed canon of sacred writing, the practice of resistant reading, an acknowledgement and exploration of



biblical polyvocality and ambiguity, the metaphoric interpretive mode known as *phantasie*, and finally, the privileging of the witness of marginalized persons. Of course, not every liberationist writer has used every one of these techniques; certainly, there have also been liberationist writers who, at times, have slipped into attempts to use the “master’s tools” warned against by Lorde. But in the overall sweep of liberationist writings which I have examined—a body which includes poetry, novels, interviews, speeches, essays, and other forms—I have discovered an overarching trend towards a hermeneutical practice that radically breaks with the proof-texting absolutism of the canons of anti-abolitionist and anti-gay propaganda.

If there have been some liberationist writers who have occasionally lapsed into using the “master’s tools,” have there also instances where reactionary writers have used language that seems to imitate the techniques of liberationist hermeneutics? I would answer that question in the affirmative. Consider, for example, one of Tim LaHaye’s many condemnatory statements about homosexuality. After singling out anti-gay icons Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell for praise, LaHaye speculates, “If our Lord were living in America today, I have no doubt he would speak out vigorously and frequently against this blight on humanity” (152). Is this an example of *phantasie* on the part of LaHaye? Is he creatively reimagining Jesus of Nazareth as a contemporary anti-gay political activist in the same way that, for example, Cheri DiNovo reimagines him as a radical queer who “turns the tables” on an ossified society? Despite any superficial similarities between the rhetoric of LaHaye and DiNovo, I argue that there still remains a vast gulf of difference between these two writers—and moreover, between the vast majorities of reactionary biblical interpreters and their liberationist counterparts. The *phantasie* of Cheri DiNovo, Maurine Waun, Justin Tanis, and others takes place within an overall hermeneutical movement which ultimately challenges and destabilizes absolutist hermeneutics in

the service of social tolerance and civil rights. Tim LaHaye's recasting of Jesus as the third leg of a triumvirate that includes Bryant and Falwell, on the other hand, occurs within a context in which LaHaye is fundamentally focusing the reader on a traditionally absolutist reading of the classic texts of anti-gay biblical interpretation, and in which he is exhorting his readers to take part in the political struggle to strip lesbians and gay men of their civil rights. LaHaye's line about a contemporary Jesus is just a bit of "spice" in an absolutist stew; on the other hand, the seven liberationist techniques sketched above form the radical core of this alternate hermeneutical model.

The ultimate aim of reactionary Christianity movements, as embodied in their absolutist hermeneutics, is to restrict the social, political, and ecclesiastic "spaces" occupied by certain marginalized groups. Reactionary Christianity is thus about separation and isolation; perhaps no metaphor better represents this constrictive move than does that of the "closet" from which gay women and men seek to free themselves. Liberationist Christian movements, on the other hand, have focused on removing the restraints from marginalized people. As noted above, openly gay priest Zalmon O. Sherwood finds inspiration for this mission in the very person of Jesus—a Jesus whose disciples represented the marginal elements of his culture. Sherwood writes further, "My own experience of marginalization empowers me to reach out to others at the edge of society—battered women, abused children, prisoners, refugees, mentally and physically differently-abled persons, poor and hungry persons, elderly persons, persons of color and different faiths" (101). For Sherwood, the liberationist struggle lived out within a specific context (in his case, as a gay man) thus opens him to a wider struggle—a struggle that embraces humanity in the fullness of its diversity.

## 5.0 CHAPTER FOUR: HERMENEUTICS WITHOUT BORDERS

This study has, until this point, focused on the contradictory uses of the Bible within the context of the history and politics of the United States. However, the Bible has been a textual battleground all over the globe. Furthermore, the larger issue of hermeneutics—that is, beyond a specifically biblical hermeneutics—is a field of inquiry which is likewise international in scope. These observations lead me to a question: Can some of the debates and skirmishes over biblical hermeneutics, as well as over hermeneutics in general, from this greater international context enrich our understanding of the American controversies which I have examined in the previous two chapters of this study?

I would answer my own question in the affirmative. In this chapter I will look in particular at three loci of inquiry which I find relevant to the debates over anti-abolitionist and anti-gay hermeneutics. These three loci are the *ubuntu* theology of post-apartheid South Africa, the *minjung* theology of South Korea, and German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's exploration of the Aristotelian concept *phronesis*. Originating in three different continents and emerging from very different cultural conditions, these three loci of inquiry nonetheless provide a fresh set of “tools” with which one can further excavate and illuminate the cultural wars of the United States.

**“[. . .] A DELICATE NETWORK OF INTERDEPENDENCE”:  
DESMOND TUTU AND THE EMERGENCE OF UBUNTU THEOLOGY**

In order to understand *ubuntu* theology, it is first necessary to understand the system of racial classification and discrimination known as apartheid. Apartheid, which dominated the culture and politics of South Africa for decades before its demise in 1990, had deep roots in South African history. Perhaps its earliest precursor was a 1685 Cape Colony law which forbade marriage between Europeans and Africans. However, apartheid in its fully-developed form came into being in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1936 the African and mixed race people of the Cape lost the right to vote. This disenfranchisement provided the opportunity for the National Party to come into power on a ticket of racial segregation in 1948. The new regime passed legislation which classified South Africa's people by race and established restrictions based on these classifications (“Apartheid”); these laws became the foundation for decades of oppression, violence, and suffering.

The plight of black South Africans under apartheid has obvious parallels to the conditions endured by African-Americans under slavery, and later under post-Civil War segregation. There are, however, some important differences between the two situations. For example, the racial divide in South Africa was complicated by the legacy of conflict between two European groups during the colonial era: South Africans of English background on one hand, and the Afrikaners, or Boers—whose heritage is Dutch—on the other. This conflict fed into the ethnic “mythology” of the white South Africans—a mythology which would come to cast an extremely dangerous shadow over South Africa.

This mythology stems in part from events of the 1830s, when a group of Afrikaners became enraged by British colonial policies which were seen as eroding the superior status of white Europeans over black Africans. The Afrikaners departed the Cape area: “They undertook what came to be called the Great Trek, perceiving themselves as somehow reenacting the Exodus of God’s chosen people from their bondage in Egypt. They were the new elect, God’s chosen escaping from the bondage of British imperialism” (Tutu, *No Future* 70). Tensions between Afrikaners and British colonial power eventually erupted into the Anglo-Boer War, a conflict which straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The atrocities of this war were monumental: “[T]he British incarcerated more than 200,000 people, including Boer women and children and black workers on Boer farms, in what was a new British invention at the time—concentration camps [. . .]. Nearly 50,000 inmates are estimated to have died in unacceptable conditions” (Tutu, *No Future* 28).

In addition to the Afrikaner/British divide, the white/black divide also figured into South African racial mythology. T. Dunbar Moodie has noted that the Zulu people in particular became a symbol of “the black African threat to the Afrikaner’s racial identity.” Moodie adds that this tension, like that between Afrikaner and Englishman, was also cast in theological terms, with the Zulus seen as a tool used by God to unite his chosen Afrikaner people “in holy covenant” as he prepared them “for a special destiny” (qtd. in Battle 30). White colonial discourse about black Africans employed the language of anthropology as well as that of theology. Simon Maimela notes that “white history books are full of stories about African fratricidal rivalries before the white man came to secure peace between various ethnic groups. [. . .] Details of stock-thefts, misconstrued treaties, cheating and heinous crimes that blacks are alleged to have perpetrated against innocent whites fill the pages [. . .]. Nothing good or creative

was to be found among blacks” (51, 52). Such one-sided, stereotypical language about black Africans is similar to the anti-black invective used by such anti-abolitionist writers as Howell Cobb and Samuel Cartwright—it is language designed to strip the dignity from an entire demographic of human beings. Such language about a particular demographic, when generated by multiple sources, ultimately coalesces into a larger pseudoanthropological narrative—a narrative that may become the “Bible<sub>12</sub>” discussed in Chapter One. This is exactly what happened in the case of pro-apartheid biblical hermeneutics.

Like the defenders of slavery, the defenders of apartheid saw the Bible as a formidable ally. Consider a 1970 declaration in defense of apartheid made by J. D. Vorster, who at the time was a key leader of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa:

Our only guide is the Bible. Our policy and outlook on life are based on the Bible. We firmly believe the way we interpret it is right. We will not budge one inch from our interpretation to satisfy anyone in South Africa or abroad. The world may differ from our interpretation. This will not influence us. The world may be wrong. We are right and will continue to follow the way the Bible teaches. (qtd. in Villa-Vicencio 59)

Again mirroring the defenders of American slavery and segregation, the proponents of apartheid also trotted out a series of biblical proof texts by which to buttress their racial ideology. Among these texts was the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), at the conclusion of which the deity sets divisions among humankind by means of geography and language.<sup>95</sup> Such proof texts

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<sup>95</sup> Other critical pro-apartheid proof texts included Deuteronomy 32:8, 9 and Acts 2:5-11 and 17:26 (Bax 117-33).

combined with the racial mythology of white South Africa to form the true “bible” (that is, the Bible<sub>T4</sub>) of pro-apartheid Christendom.

The pro-apartheid stance assumed by many white Christians in South Africa was countered by what Peter Walshe has called “a prophetic, politically activist Christianity” (9). This activist Christianity was tied in part to the African National Congress, which was formed in 1912 and became a key factor in the anti-apartheid movement. Walshe notes, “Within the ANC, generations of political leadership drew on Christian values in the belief that these required the building of a broader political community. The ethical imperative was to move beyond the confines of family, clan, tribe and race by pursuing non-racial and increasingly egalitarian legislation” (14, 15). A key event in the development of anti-apartheid theological discourse was the 1981 founding of The Institute of Contextual Theology. Through conferences, workshops, and publications, this Johannesburg-based organization “worked to articulate a theology that grew out of an understanding of South African history, an analysis of social structures including sexism, and reflection on the conditions of the poor” (Walshe 116). The ICT played a critical role in the 1985 publication of a statement known as the *Kairos Document*, which was signed by 151 clergy, lay persons, and academic theologians. Peter Walshe observes that this statement, which condemns the pro-apartheid theology of the South African government, “emerged from a process of biblical exegesis inspired by an empathy for, and dialogue with, the anguished folk of the townships, young and old, whose lives were blighted by apartheid and traumatised by repression” (116, 117). The *Kairos Document* thus gave voice to anti-apartheid Christianity.

Another significant text in the evolution of anti-apartheid theology was the 1983 anthology *Apartheid Is a Heresy*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, this collection brought together a number of voices from the anti-apartheid struggle. Particularly

significant among the contributions to the anthology is Desmond Tutu's essay "Christianity and Apartheid." Tutu, a key leader of the Anglican church in South Africa, criticized pro-apartheid theology and practice in the context of his own reading of the New Testament:

Skin colour and race become salvation principles, since in many cases they determine which people can participate in which church services—which are believed to be of saving significance. It is not enough to be baptised after confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. One must possess yet another attribute, which in the nature of the case must be reserved only for a select few. It is as if St. Paul never had the controversies with the Judaisers, who demanded that new Gentile converts had to be circumcised, thus undermining the fact that salvation was a gracious and unmerited gift from God. (45)

Tutu refers to an issue addressed in the letter to the Galatians (6:12-15). In drawing an analogy between pro-apartheid Christians of the twentieth century and "circumcision fundamentalists" of the first century CE, Tutu demonstrates an impulse to reclaim the Bible from such clergy as J. D. Vorster. As voices such as Tutu's emerged to condemn apartheid, the entrenched spokespersons of pro-apartheid Christendom moved to counter them. Douglas Bax, in his contribution to *Apartheid Is a Heresy*, observes that South Africa's pro-apartheid churches "accuse those who understand the Bible differently of being misled by a 'liberal' and 'humanistic' ideology" (112). This tactic of using various *isms*—in this case, liberalism and humanism—as a slur against liberationist hermeneutics was, of course, used by some in the anti-abolitionist movement, and continues to be favored by many in the anti-gay movement, as documented in Chapter Two of



this study.<sup>96</sup> Despite such invective against them, the spokespersons of anti-apartheid Christianity pressed on with their cause. Indeed, Allan Boesak saw international implications in the theological program of anti-apartheid activists: “In a strange fashion, God has chosen the Church in South Africa to be in the forefront of a worldwide battle for justice, peace, human liberation and genuine reconciliation. After all, apartheid is but a microcosm of a worldwide situation” (xii).

One South African who has, since the fall of the apartheid regime, worked to carry on such a “worldwide battle” is the above-mentioned Desmond Tutu. His career as an Anglican clergyman in South Africa has been inextricably intertwined both with the fight against apartheid and the movement for post-apartheid reconciliation.<sup>97</sup> Tutu has achieved a number of historic milestones during this decades-long journey. In 1975 he was appointed Dean of St. Mary’s Cathedral in Johannesburg—the first black person to attain the position. Tutu himself dates the “public and high profile” phase of his fight against apartheid to this historic appointment (*No Future* 12). Tutu achieved another breakthrough when, in 1978, he became the first black General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. The 1980s saw Tutu’s international profile rise even higher: in 1984 he was awarded the Nobel peace prize for his anti-apartheid efforts, and in 1986 he was elected Archbishop of Cape Town, thus becoming the first black head of the Anglican Church in South Africa. Tutu remained a key figure in South Africa after the 1990 demise of the apartheid regime. In 1995 South African President Nelson Mandela

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<sup>96</sup> See pages 76-79 for specific examples.

<sup>97</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the bibliographic information about Tutu in this paragraph is drawn from “Desmond Tutu—The Nobel Peace Prize 1984” and “Profile: Archbishop Desmond Tutu,” articles from the Nobel Foundation and BBC News websites, respectively.

appointed him to the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body whose mission was to help the scarred nation achieve some closure in the wake of the apartheid era.

Tutu remains a major international figure, and continues to both hone and promulgate the theological and hermeneutical practices which marked his long battle against apartheid. One concept that has emerged as central to Tutu's ongoing project is *ubuntu*:

The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and the rest of God's creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called *ubuntu* in Nguni languages, or *botho* in Sotho, which is difficult to translate into English. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. (Tutu and Abrams 25, 26)

*Ubuntu* might be thus seen as a philosophical or ethical position—"It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion." But Tutu also describes *ubuntu* as a quality that characterizes some people, and which impacts their interpersonal relations: "A person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good" (Tutu and Abrams 26). For Tutu, *ubuntu* is thus an essential foundation for a just and peaceful society; it is the antithesis of the spirit of apartheid.

Connections might be drawn between Tutu's concept of *ubuntu* and the theories of difference articulated by such thinkers as Audre Lorde. Tutu declares that *ubuntu* "has to do with what it means to be truly human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life. And so we must search for this ultimate attribute and reject ethnicity and other such qualities as irrelevancies. [. . .] We can be human only together, black and white, rich and poor,

Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jew” (Tutu and Abrams 26, 27). Although they share much common ground, there seems to be a difference in both tone and emphasis between the discourse of Tutu and Lorde. Much of Lorde’s 1984 prose collection *Sister Outsider*, for example, is devoted to cataloguing, defining, and exploring such destructive difference-based *isms* as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. In this volume Lorde also reclaims her own anger over such destructive *isms*, noting that anger “is loaded with information and energy” (127). Tutu shares with Lorde an appreciation of the role of anger. Reflecting on churches that buttress an unjust status quo, for example, Tutu declares, “A church that tries to pacify us, telling us not to concentrate on the things of this world but of the other, the next world, needs to be treated with withering scorn and contempt [. . .]. There is no neutrality in a situation of injustice and oppression” (Tutu and Abrams 65). Like Lorde, Tutu also expresses his awareness of the destructive ways in which human differences, such as racial difference, have been used as tools of division and abuse. But for him, *ubuntu* can work to counteract the destructive forces catalogued by Lorde: “They [i.e. people with *ubuntu*] know they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they are less than who they are.” As an example of *ubuntu* in action, he describes the funeral of Molly Blackburn, a white human rights activist. Taking place at “the height of racial tension in South Africa,” Blackburn’s funeral attracted a crowd of twenty thousand people, over ninety per cent of whom were black. Tutu suggests that this massive crowd of black people stood up for this white woman “because Molly looked on you and saw a human being of infinite worth [. . .]. She did not see you as black or white, but as a human being” (Tutu and Abrams 26, 27). *Ubuntu* thus empowers people to move from anger to solidarity, and to transcend differences such as race. It might be seen as Tutu’s antidote to the poisons catalogued by Lorde.

Rooted in Desmond Tutu's experience in the anti-apartheid struggle, *ubuntu* appears to have applications beyond a twentieth-century South African context. Journalist Sean Coughlan has observed that *ubuntu* has "entered the political lexicon" as a result of South Africa's political evolution—by way of example he notes that former United States president Bill Clinton lectured his audience on the importance of *ubuntu* while addressing a conference of the United Kingdom's Labour Party in 2006. Coughlan adds that *ubuntu* has also "entered the language of development and free trade." *Ubuntu* appears to be further catching on in the Anglican communion beyond South Africa. In 2008 it was announced that the Episcopal Church of the United States had adopted *ubuntu* as one of the themes of its upcoming 2009 General Convention (Schjonberg). *Ubuntu* has even begun to show up as the topic of sermons by clergy in the United States.<sup>98</sup>

Tutu's *ubuntu* philosophy manifests itself in his approach to the Bible. Consider Tutu's reading of the story of the creation of Eve (Genesis 2:18-25)—a narrative that is often used as an anti-gay proof text. Tutu reflects, "That story reminds us that God has made us in such a way that we need each other. We are made for companionship and relationship. It is not good for us to be alone" (Tutu and Abrams 25). Unlike the literalistic "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" reading of Genesis employed in anti-gay rhetoric, Tutu's reading is gender-neutral, and focuses on the universal theme of human companionship—a theme which transcends not only gender,

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<sup>98</sup> The texts of sermons by Deborah Cayer, who preached at the Unitarian Church of Sharon, Massachusetts in 2007, and by Jim Melnyk, who preached at St. Mark's Episcopal Church of Raleigh, North Carolina in 2002, have been made available online by those respective churches.

but also race, national origin, and other axes of difference. Elsewhere in his writings Tutu is more explicit in his support of homosexual relationships:

The endless divisions that we create between us and that we live and die for—whether they are our religions, our ethnic groups, our nationalities—are so totally irrelevant to God. God just wants us to love each other. Many, however, say that some kinds of love are better than others, condemning the love of gays and lesbians. But whether a man loves a woman or another man, or a woman loves a man or another woman, to God it is all love, and God smiles whenever we recognize our need for one another. (Tutu and Abrams 47, 48).

In his critique of these “endless divisions” that plague humanity, Tutu may be intentionally echoing a New Testament writer’s similar call to recognize a transcending unity: “<sup>26</sup>[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28 [NRSV]). However, Tutu’s assertion of a transcending unity goes far beyond that of the apostle Paul. Tutu’s vision embraces not only those who have “clothed [them]selves with Christ,” but also those who profess other faith traditions; Tutu’s vision also explicitly embraces lesbians and gay men. Indeed, Tutu connects his pro-gay position directly to the Christian messiah himself. In the 2007 documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So*, Tutu declares, “I equate homophobia to the injustice of apartheid and as so contrary to the heart of our lord and savior Jesus Christ.”

Both Tutu’s resistance to literalistic readings of the Bible and his willingness to read the Bible with a more inclusive moral vision reflect the *ubuntu* worldview which he espouses.

Literalism at its worst reflects a profound insecurity and fear—a fear that leads its practitioners to cling to the concept of an inerrant Bible as a psychological anchor in world of constant change. This dependence upon a fetishistic “security blanket” stands in contrast to the broader vision which Tutu associates with people who have *ubuntu*: “[T]hey have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong to a greater whole” (Tutu and Abrams 26). The *ubuntu* mindset is holistic and inclusive; it does not fear those who differ on the basis of religion, race, or other characteristics, and it does not seek an inerrant fetish as a tool by which to marginalize and control the “different.”

Both Tutu’s celebration of *ubuntu* as a healing force in society and *ubuntu*’s impact on his own biblical hermeneutics hold relevance to the liberationist hermeneutical practices discussed in the previous chapter of this study. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Tutu has taken an indigenous African concept and applied it to Christian ethics. By so going beyond the Bible in search of spiritual and ethical principles, Tutu is being true to his own advice: “We must seek truth wherever we find it. [ . . . ] When religious truth, scientific truth, and whatever truth come together and become part of a framework that makes sense of the universe, I am awestruck, and I find that truth then has a self-authenticating quality” (Tutu and Abrams 106). Tutu’s perception of truth in the indigenous culture of black Africans—a people who were historically demonized by so many Eurocentric Christians—has its parallels in both abolitionist and pro-gay theology and hermeneutics. Abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Lloyd Garrison found in the testimony of former slaves a truth which supplemented and informed their own understanding of the Bible; similarly, contemporary pro-gay theologians like Carter Heyward and Gary David Comstock see in the lives and culture of the LGBT community a witness which challenges decades of stale anti-gay hermeneutics.

Michael Battle has observed that *ubuntu* “provides a corrective hermeneutic for Western salvation theology that focuses on the individual” (4, 5). Battle notes further, “Tutu articulates a system of liberation from idolatrous submission to systems of oppression, such as apartheid [. . .]. For him, idolatry is the deification of the ideology used to make holy the structures of oppression, allowing them to appear to reflect the will of God” (143). Abolitionist and pro-gay approaches of the Bible have similarly functioned as “corrective” hermeneutical practices. Because Tutu has defined *ubuntu* in such expansive and embracing terms, one might even conceive as anti-slavery and pro-gay hermeneutics as falling under the umbrella of a larger *ubuntu* hermeneutics—a larger hermeneutics that is capable of overcoming all of the manifestations of fear and oppression that are rooted in perceptions of difference.

#### **“[. . .] TO BREAK EVERY YOKE, AND LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE”:**

#### **THE MINJUNG THEOLOGY OF SOUTH KOREA**

“Minjung is a dangerous word,” according to Kwang-sun David (qtd. in Bonino 158). This word<sup>99</sup> has come to be associated with minjung theology, a branch of Christian theology originating in South Korea. In order to better understand minjung theology, it is helpful to look both at the linguistic roots and historic context of the term *minjung*. Hans Ucko observes that the

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<sup>99</sup> There is disagreement among the authors I have consulted as to whether or not the word *minjung* should be capitalized. I have opted to follow the lead of Jung Young Lee in leaving it lowercase; furthermore, I have chosen not to employ the marker *sic* in quotes where the word appears capitalized. Every author I have consulted, however, has opted to leave the word unitalicized. I have followed suit, only choosing to italicize *minjung* when I am specifically referring to the word, rather than to the concept.

Korean word *minjung* is composed of two Chinese characters: *min*, signifying “people,” and *jung*, signifying “the masses.” *Minjung* thus might be literally construed to mean “the mass of the people.” However, there are added dimensions to this literalistic denotation. Noting that the word *minjung* “was originally used to denote the people in opposition to the ruling classes,” Ucko adds that the context for this term “has always been the suffering and struggle of the people in an unjust situation” (79).

According to Jung Young Lee, the “minjung struggle for liberation” can be dated back to the twelfth century CE—specifically, to an 1176 peasant rebellion and to an 1198 anti-slavery rebellion (“Minjung” 12). It might thus be said that the minjung movement predates not only the gay rights and the anti-apartheid struggles, but also the movement to abolish the enslavement of people of African heritage. The roots of minjung consciousness would generate a rich heritage of activism:

In the nineteenth century, the Hong Kyung-rae peasant rebellion in 1811, the Imsul rebellion in 1862, and the Donghak (Ch’öndokyo) rebellion in 1894-95 were important events of the minjung struggle for liberation. The March First Independent movement in 1919, the April Student Revolution in 1960, and Kwang-ju revolt on May 18, 1980—all have been regarded as most significant events for minjung liberation. (Lee, “Minjung” 12).

Hans Ucko has noted that the concept of *minjung* “received an important dimension” during the domination of an annexed Korea by Japan, particularly during the 1920s, and that the concept “grew in importance in the struggle for human rights and democracy” during the 1970s, a decade marked by military dictatorship in South Korea (79). The minjung movement, if seen as an historic continuity, thus spans nine centuries, and incorporates such aspects as anti-slavery



activism, peasants' rights, anti-imperialism, student activism, and the pro-democracy struggle. It is this sweeping historic and moral context that gives the word *minjung* its power and complexity.

The many layers of potential meaning encompassed by the word *minjung* also render it, like the Nguni word *ubuntu*, fundamentally untranslatable into a simple English equivalent. According to Hans Ucko, this translation challenge stems from the fact that “the categories of European sociology do not apply and are not sufficient to cover the notion of Minjung” (79). Jung Young Lee offers a similar caution, observing that “it is difficult for non-Koreans to understand fully the meaning of the word minjung.” Lee adds, “Knowing the uniqueness of the word, we should not press hard to translate it into English or any other language. What we need to do is understand its approximate meaning as best we can” (3).

These translation issues lead to a number of questions. Who are the minjung? Might the term *minjung* be applied to individuals or to groups outside a specifically Korean context? A number of commentators provide us with avenues to approach such questions. Moon Dong-whan, for example, defines the minjung as “all those people who are politically, economically, socially and culturally oppressed and alienated by the existing system of society” (Ogle 72 n. 1). Jin-Kwan Kwon suggests some related terms “that could help explicate the meaning of the Minjung”: *the proletariat, nation, citizen, minorities, and the others* (140). “But,” he cautions, “each of these terms by itself is not able to cover the whole meaning of the Minjung. They express certain aspects of the Minjung” (160). An even more comprehensive definition of minjung is offered by Suh Kwang-sun David:

The minjung is present where there is sociocultural alienation, economic exploitation, and political suppression. Therefore, a woman is a minjung when

she is dominated by man, by the family, or by sociocultural structures and factors. An ethnic group is a minjung group when it is politically and economically discriminated against by another ethnic group. A race is minjung when it is dominated by another ruling race. When intellectuals are suppressed for using their creative and critical abilities against rulers on behalf of the oppressed, then they too belong to the minjung. Workers and farmers are minjung when they are exploited, their needs and demands are ignored, and they are crushed down by the ruling powers. (qtd. in Dickson 179, 180)

David's sweeping definition seems to expand the concept of minjung beyond an explicitly Korean context. The overarching theme of David's broad definition is the notion of individuals and groups that are marginalized and ground down by an oppressive power structure. Also critical to David's concept of minjung is the phenomenon of difference—difference that might be based on gender, ethnicity, race, political position, or socioeconomic status. Indeed, such an expansive concept of minjung might be said to embrace a number of the individuals and groups: African-American slaves, as well as free abolitionists who faced suppression of their views; black South Africans under apartheid, and also to white South Africans who were targeted for their roles in the anti-apartheid struggle; and lesbians and gay men who face discrimination due to entrenched sociocultural and political structures.

The minjung concept, with its rich history and complex layers of meaning, has been adopted by Christian thinkers in South Korea, thereby producing a distinctive branch of Christian theology. Hans Ucko traces the roots of this minjung theology to the Tonghak rebellion of 1895, an uprising of poor peasants: "Although the rebellion was crushed it opened the door for Christian mission among the Minjung, who came to recognise Christianity as a tool against

repression and oppression” (85). Eventually a tension evolved between, on one hand, the missionaries who set out to Christianize Korea, and, on the other hand, the minjung who sought to blend Christianity together with a program of political liberation. In fact, Ucko notes that wary missionaries “were afraid that the churches be looked upon as a tool for political liberation and began narrowing down the liberating message to become a question only of spiritual liberation” (85). Ironically, early Korean converts gravitated toward African-American spirituals like “Go Down Moses”—songs whose lyrics often contained coded messages of social protest (Ucko 83). The Koreans also found special meaning in the Exodus narrative, particularly its theme of liberation from enslavement. Ucko observes that the continuous retelling of the Exodus narrative served “to raise the national and political consciousness of the hearers concerning liberation,” thereby subverting the depoliticization agenda of the missionaries. Although this early flowering of liberatory hermeneutics evaded the attention of the missionaries, its significance was not lost on Korea’s imperial overlords after the peninsula’s 1910 annexation by Japan: “The Japanese colonial government noticed what was happening and banned the use of the Old Testament during the Second World War. [ . . . ] The five books of Moses were seen to express a dangerous nationalism” (Ucko 84). Despite the efforts of both cautious missionaries and an overbearing colonial government, it appears that a powerful theological seed found purchase in Korea in the decades leading up to World War II.

It would be decades more before this seed would produce its most potent fruits. Jung Young Lee writes that a critical development in the history of minjung theology was the work of the Urban Industrial Mission in the 1960s: “Through this mission, serious Christians volunteered to work at least six months as evangelists and laborers in the urban industrial complex.” The results of this ambitious contrast made for a stark contrast with the experience of that first wave

of Christian missionaries in Korea so many decades earlier: “While the initial aim was ‘spiritual’ evangelization, the Christian laborers, in the face of tremendous injustices and unconscionable working conditions, perceived the struggle for social justice as part of their apostolate” (7). Instead of trying to strip political and social activism from Christianity, this new generation of missionaries embraced an activist gospel.

Minjung theology continued to grow as the decades passed. Paul S. Chung notes that the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea, particularly through its educational organ, the Han Shin Seminary, “developed and championed minjung theology in order to challenge the political dictatorship and economic injustice of the 1970s and onward” (2). A major milestone of the 1970s was the publication of a manifesto entitled *The Theological Declaration of Korean Christians*; John B. Cobb observes that with this document, “minjung theology grasped the attention of the world.” However, Cobb notes further that the authors of the *Theological Declaration* “paid a high price for their commitment to the Korean people and especially to the exploited poor. Some of them were rejected by the Christian churches. Some lost their positions as teachers. Others were imprisoned by the military government” (ix). Despite this resistance by such entrenched authority structures, Jin-Kwan Kwon writes that minjung theology continued to lead Koreans “toward a realization of democracy and human rights” in the 1970s and 1980s. Kwon observes also that this branch of Christian theology “affected other intellectual and cultural disciplines [. . .] as well as the society as a whole” (159). Minjung theology continues to be a vital current of Christian thought, and has generated a truly international and multicultural body of literature.

Minjung theology brings a new set of intellectual tools to the fields of Christian ethics and biblical hermeneutics. Chief among these tools is the concept of han. Like the term *minjung*

itself, the word *han* has no easy English translation. Jung Young Lee even warns that han “is unique to the experience of Korean minjung, and is therefore not easily understood by non-Koreans” (8). Since, however, han functions as “the major problem” of minjung theology (Park), it is a concept worthy of further exploration.

Han may be conceptualized in multiple ways. A. Sung Park, for example, describes it as an emotion: “Han is the compressed feeling of suffering caused by injustice and oppression, a complex feeling of resentment and helplessness, anger and lamentation.” Hans Ucko uses similar terms in his attempt to define the emotional aspect of han: “Han is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice and suffering, a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming odds, a feeling of abandonment, pain in one’s guts and bowels” (81). But han is more than emotion; it also has the quality of a potential energy: “Han may be defined as having an eruptive anger, a potential for revolt” (Ogle 68). A. Sung Park notes further, “Han is potential energy, an active volcano of indignation and agony. Depending on how it is unraveled, Han may turn out to be a creative energy for revolution or may explode destructively to seek revenge and killing.”

Park breaks down the complexity of han into two dimensions, personal and collective; Park notes further that each of these dimensions has two levels: conscious and unconscious. Whereas personal conscious han is manifested in anger, helplessness, and resentment, personal unconscious han “is buried in deep anguish and bitterness.” Han is demonstrated in its collective conscious level through “collective wrath, rage, street demonstrations, and rebellion”; collective unconscious han, on the other hand, “is submerged in the deep silence of racial lamentation.” Again, this fourfold breakdown invites application to minjung-like communities outside of an explicitly Korean context. For example, American slave revolts like that led by Nat Turner might be seen as a manifestation of collective conscious han.

According to A. Sung Park, han bears a special relationship to the traditional Christian idea of sin: “While sin is an offense against God and neighbor, Han is the painful experience of the victim of sin. Sin is the act of the oppressor and Han is the suffering of the victim. Sin belongs to the oppressor; Han belongs to the downtrodden.” Park faults the “traditional doctrine of sin” for leaving out this suffering of the victim. I would venture to take Park’s criticism even further, particularly in light of the witness of abolitionist and gay activist literature. As Harriet Jacobs describes in her account of pro-slavery religious education, the traditional concept of sin was explicitly deployed as a tool by which the white master caste sought to psychologically control its slaves. Mr. Pike, the white preacher employed by the local slaveowners, castigated his captive audience as sinners and commanded them to be obedient to their owners. In Mr. Pike’s theology, it was the slave who was the sinner when he disobeyed his master. The greatest “sin” in such a worldview would be that of the slave who, as Harriet Jacobs did ultimately, made an attempt to escape from slavery. The concept of han offers a corrective to such a theology by redirecting the focus to the actual suffering of enslaved persons—the economic exploitation, physical beatings, sexual abuse, and other harm inflicted upon them. A han-grounded analysis reveals that it is not the fleeing slave who is committing sin, but rather the exploitative master who has sinned against his human “property.” Such a han-based analysis might also enrich a further reading of Leroy Aarons’ *Prayers for Bobby*. Mary Griffith harped on the alleged “sins” of her gay son, not stopping to understand the suffering she was inflicting upon him. Bobby’s han would eventually be made manifest in his suicide; furthermore, his han invites his mother to consider that the true sin is the demonization of gay people.

Han is closely tied to dan, another key concept within minjung theology. George Ogle, a veteran of the seminal Urban Industrial Mission, defines dan as “a break with the past” that

consists of “repentance plus a turning toward justice.” He elaborates further: “Because of the presence of minjung theology within its body, the church is confronted with the opportunity of *dan*. Some will hear and move toward justice.” This justice is made manifest in “the evangelical task of solidarity with the minjung through Jesus of Nazareth” (71). Jung Young Lee adds to this line of thought by making explicit the relationship between *han* and *dan*: “*Dan* means to resolve *han*. It is to cut off the chain of *han* that creates vicious circles of violence and repression” (“Minjung” 10).

According to Robert McAfee Brown, the complex relationship that unites the concepts of minjung, *han*, and *dan* are present in the New Testament gospels:

We can get a further insight into Jesus’ ministry when we reflect that from the minjung perspective, Jesus identified with and suffered with the minjung of his time, that he learned their *han*, and that his act of going to Jerusalem and suffering was “the act of *dan*,” cutting loose from, and helping others to cut loose from, the *han* that was so stultifying. (39).

Brown writes further that the message of Jesus’ ministry “is thus a message of hope. The minjung need not remain locked in *han*. They can participate with Jesus in the act of *dan*, and secure, with him, their own liberation” (39). This interplay between the phenomena of minjung, *han*, and *dan* within a liberatory Judeo-Christian context might be seen as present in many abolitionist texts. Consider, for example, Frederick Douglass’ groundbreaking 1845 slave narrative, together with its 1845 preface by William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass writes as a member of an oppressed group of people—namely, people of African descent who have experienced enslavement in the United States—which might be seen as analogous to the minjung of Korea. The outrage in Douglass’ voice as he describes the injustices and cruelties visited

upon himself and his fellow slaves is a vivid manifestation of han. But Douglass' very act of writing this witness is an act of dan—a bold attempt to contribute to the anti-slavery cause via activist literature. In his preface Garrison celebrates the dan of Douglass and further invites the reader to join in a larger, collective act of dan:

Reader! are you with the men-stealers in sympathy of and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then you are the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf? Be faithful, be vigilant, be untiring in your efforts to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. (42)

Garrison's challenge to his, and Douglass', readers to stand with the "down-trodden," the "oppressed," might be seen as a call to solidarity with the minjung of this time and culture.

The phenomena of han, dan, and minjung might also be seen as present in many gay activist texts that are written within a specifically Judeo-Christian tradition. Among such "texts" is Daniel Karslake's documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So*. Through interviews and other footage, Karslake tells the stories of a number of American families who have struggled over the traditional Christian stance on homosexuality. The film records in particular the suffering endured by both gay individuals and their families as a result of societal homophobia. Mary Lou Wallner, one of the film's interviewees, tells a story strikingly similar to that recorded by Leroy Aarons in *Prayers for Bobby*. Wallner, operating from a fundamentalist Christian worldview, became estranged from her daughter Anna due to Anna's lesbianism. Like Mary Griffith, Mary Lou used biblical verses against her own child. And, like Mary Griffith, Mary Lou ultimately lost her gay child to a brutal suicide. The film includes graphic photographic documentation of Anna's corpse, her neck discolored from bruising caused by the dog chain with which she hung



herself. The image of Anna's ruined, lifeless body bears a mute but horrifying testimony to the han she experienced.

The film reminds the viewer that anti-gay persecution causes suffering not only to gay people, but also to their family members. Also interviewed for the film are Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson and his parents. Robinson made history in 2003 when he became the first openly gay person to be consecrated a bishop by the Episcopal Church of the United States. The film documents the public consecration, as well as the events leading up to it. Robinson recalls the anti-gay hate mail he received in the days leading up to his consecration. One particularly chilling letter is shown on camera: composed of letters apparently cut out of print sources and pasted onto a page, and featuring a photograph of the bishop-to-be and his male partner, the letter reads, "I have a bullet for each of your heads when you least expect it." Such threats made a deep impact on Robinson's mother, Imogene Robinson. Recalling the fear she experienced before the consecration, she declares, "My main concern was someone killin' him during the whole thing." Her face contorts with pain as she says these words. Another concerned mother interviewed in the film is Randi Reitan, a Minnesotan who shares with her husband Phil a strong connection to the Lutheran Christian tradition. Randi recalls her driveway being vandalized with an anti-gay slur after her gay son Jake, who is also interviewed in the film, "came out" to her and her husband while still in high school. Randi, who had feared her son becoming a target of anti-gay hostility, cries on camera as she recalls scrubbing the slur off her property and thinking, "It's already starting." The obvious pain on the faces of both Imogene Robinson and Randi Reitan may be read in the context of minjung theology as the manifestation of han.

Just as the pain of han may be perceived in Karslake's documentary, so too can the justice-making work of dan be found. For Mary Lou Wallner, reconciliation with her daughter

was impossible. Instead, she chose to impact society through work as a pro-gay advocate, with a particular mission to challenge traditional anti-gay readings of the Bible. Her voice cracking with emotion, Mary Lou says, “I’m thankful to have hundreds of surrogate gay and lesbian Annas and it’s my greatest joy to love and accept them just as they are, and it just feels so good to be able to do for them what I couldn’t do for Anna.” Joining Mary Lou Wallner in this spirit of activism are Phil, Randi, and Jake Reitan. The film records the Reitan family’s participation in a public protest outside the gates of Focus on the Family, the anti-gay activist group headed by James Dobson. The Reitans attempt to personally deliver a letter to Dobson, but are informed that the organization’s facility is closed and that any trespassers will be subject to arrest. Phil, standing with his wife, says, “I’m an attorney—I’m a Christian—I’m a father—I love my family. And every day my family is assaulted by Dr. Dobson. We’re gonna deliver this letter to Dr. Dobson. It has to stop.” As he says this Jake, both arms around his parents, sobs with emotion. After Phil’s declaration all three attempt to enter the property in order to deliver the letter and are arrested. Discussing the family’s activism in another scene in the film, Randi Reitan says, “There’s something about doing justice, and doing it with your son who is gay and it’s just so—it’s so empowering.” The empowerment experienced by the Reitans, as well as by Mary Lou Wallner, may be read as a manifestation of *han*. In working for justice and reconciliation, these individuals move to cut off the *han* that had weighed down on them, and that continues to plague other families.

The concept of *han* also figures into minjung theology’s challenge to the absolutist conception of the Bible. Consider, for example, the experience of George Ogle. In his article “A Missionary’s Reflection on Minjung Theology,” Ogle recalls being appointed to the Urban Industrial Mission in the Korean city of Inchon in 1961. He teamed up with three Koreans, each

of them a Methodist pastor, and the quartet decided that the gospel required them “to overcome the great gulf between the church and the working class.” To that end his Korean co-missionaries joined the work force in the factories of Inchon, whereas foreigner Ogle carried out his assignment among the city’s labor unions. The experience profoundly impacted the missionary team:

Each of the four of us experienced our own introduction to the *han* of the workers. Each shared that experience with the others. All of us identified the *han* as a means of revelation to us. Jesus once more walked and suffered among us. The incarnation was a gain observed. The teachings of the gospel became a personal and social reality. (64)

Ogle’s recognition of the *han* of the *minjung* as a manifestation of sacred revelation offers a radical contrast to the absolutist hermeneutics described earlier in this study. Absolutist hermeneutics fetishizes the authority of the Bible, either alone or in partnership with a hierarchical ecclesiastic authority. But *minjung* theology, as exemplified by George Ogle, finds revelation in the witness of the marginalized. A. Sung Park also reflects on how *minjung* hermeneutics “surpass[es] the boundary of the Bible.” Park writes, “*Minjung* hermeneutics, transcending the perimeter of Christianity, appropriates Korean history, culture, religion, and tradition.” For Park, the field from which *minjung* hermeneutics may harvest is broad, and may include such phenomena as stories, songs, dance, and literature, as well as the non-Christian religious traditions of Korea. Jung Young Lee joins Ogle and Park in asserting the possibility of extrabiblical revelation within the context of *minjung* theology: “[T]he direct revelation of God, according to *minjung* theology, is available in Korea and other places without explicit connection with or reference to Christian tradition.” Lee writes further that “any act that implies the

liberation of the minjung can be understood as the Jesus-event or the act of God” (14). This acknowledgement of extrabiblical revelation is a bold challenge to absolutist notions of canon and authority.

Suh Nam-Dong also challenges traditional dogma about the biblical canon from the vantage point of minjung theology, although he approaches the subject from a different angle: “In the process of canonization, a de-politicization occurred in regards to the historical nucleus of the Scriptures, namely the liberation message of God for the minjung” (57). Nam-Dong ascribes this de-politicization in part to the Emperor Constantine’s cooption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE: “Having been elevated from an underground to the upper class, Christianity changed its character from the religion of the oppressed into that of the ruler and the king” (57, 58). Rather than turn the Bible into a fetish object, Nam-Dong stands apart from the text and critically examines it using the language of history and politics. Nam-Dong’s willingness to so criticize the Bible may call to mind Desmond Tutu’s declaration that “[t]here are parts of the Bible that have no permanent worth—that is nothing to be sorry about, it is just to say that it is the Word of God in the words of men and women” (Tutu and Abrams 106). Both Nam-Dong and Tutu express a suspicion of certain parts of the Bible—a suspicion that leads both men to reject the fundamentalist dogma of biblical inerrancy.

Although minjung theologians like Nam-Dong reject fundamentalist hermeneutics, the Bible remains for them an important object of study and interpretation. And, as have abolitionist and pro-gay readers, minjung theologians often derive from the Bible readings which radically break with the more traditional, conservative branches of Christian thought. Consider, for example, the minjung approach to the Exodus narrative. Suh Nam-Dong writes, “The Exodus

event in the Hebrew Bible is the paradigmatic event in minjung theology. [. . .] The Exodus event was a political event taking place in the socioeconomic realm.” Nam-Dong specifically cautions against readings that strip away this political and economic dimension of the narrative:

The Exodus event tells a socioeconomic story of slave emancipation or rebellion according to which the enslaved Hebrew people (*hapiru*) protested the oppressive system of domination and escaped from Pharaoh’s rule. If God’s involvement in history takes place in the socioeconomic realm, it should not be diluted or reduced to a religious symbol. (54)

Hans Ucko has also commented on the key role of the Exodus narrative in minjung theology. According to Ucko, the following passage is particularly critical:

And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which *are* in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;

And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey [. . .]. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. (Exodus 3:7-9)

Regarding the use of these verses in minjung theology, Ucko observes, “They are frequently used and held forth as if these verses were newly discovered.” Ucko suggests further that the repetition of these verses in minjung theology is a subtle way of acknowledging their neglect by the practitioners of “traditional theology” (86).

Like the Exodus narrative, the figure of Jesus also plays a major role in minjung heremenutics. Suh Nam-Dong declares Jesus to be “the very personification and symbol of minjung” (55)—a statement which may call to mind pro-gay theologian Cheri DiNovo’s declaration that “Jesus is queer” (57). As with his reading of the Exodus, Nam-Dong interprets the life of Jesus in social and political terms, reminding us that “Jesus’ crucifixion was the execution of a political rebel” (56). Nam-Dong’s assessment of Jesus’ ministry also takes into account Jesus’ relationship to minjung, Torah, and the ecclesiastic hierarchy of Jesus’ time:

Jesus was not only a companion and friend of the minjung, but he also treated them as people, with equality and dignity. Jesus, unlike the scribes in positions of authority, is anchored in this social situation. Jesus teaches the Torah and God in his own language. [. . .] At Jesus’ time, the law of God became the language of the ruling class in the established religious community. The law took the form of an ideology for oppressing minjung. Jesus’ attitude toward the Torah and public sinners was surprising and provocative to the established religion, and as such is a reference for minjung theology. (56).

Nam-Dong describes Jesus as a teacher who wrests sacred scripture from the hands of an entrenched religious hierarchy and reframes it “in his own language”; moreover, his radical teaching style takes place in the context of his identification with the marginalized communities of his time.

Other minjung theologians who share Nam-Dong’s general conception of Jesus’ ministry have focused specifically on the Nazarene rabbi’s attitude towards the Jewish Sabbath—the divinely mandated weekly day of rest. The Sabbath issue is addressed in the gospel of Mark. After Jesus’ followers pluck corn from the fields on the Sabbath, the Pharisees criticize them for

violating the ancient religious law (Mark 2:23, 24). Jesus responds by telling his followers' critics, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In interpreting this narrative Chang-Nack Kim first reflects on the overwhelming significance of the Sabbath, noting that, together with the temple and the rite of circumcision, the Sabbath was one of "the three main pillars which propped up the Jewish community at the time of Jesus." Furthermore, Kim notes that the Sabbath was respected as preeminent among these three iconic institutions because it "was assumed to have been established by God himself from the time of the creation." This cultural and religious context demonstrates the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath. As Kim writes, "He put the reason for being of the Sabbath not in itself but outside of it. The validity of sabbath should be determined only by the criterion whether it benefits people or not. Every institution, however traditional or sacred it is, must be tested ultimately by this criterion" (96). Ahn Byung-Mu takes this line of analysis even further in his reflections on Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath:

If we reflect on this law, we realize immediately that the only ones capable of observing the Sabbath are those who, at the very least, are certain of their next day's provisions. People who, by occupation, are forced to obtain food through daily wages in terms of working as shepherds, boat workers or prostitutes, or peasants confronted with drought, could not possibly observe the laws of the Sabbath.

Byung-Mu concludes that these individuals so prevented from observing the Sabbath of the privileged "were alienated from the system and were branded 'sinners'" (38). Thus, the Pharisee's absolutist approach to the Sabbath in the gospel of Mark forms a striking contrast to the teachings of Jesus. As Byung-Mu declares, "Jesus stood on the side of the minjung—the

suffering, the hungry, the crying, the thirsty, and the oppressed crowds” (47). For both Kim and Byung-Mu, the Sabbath, as defended by the Pharisees, becomes a tool by which a privileged elite inflict oppression upon marginalized persons. Minjung theology offers a framework by which individuals, including the marginalized, can stand above even this most hallowed religious institution and critically evaluate it.

The critical analysis of the Sabbath conducted by Chang-Nack Kim and Ahn Byung-Mu might be seen as symbolic the larger analysis of the entire scriptural canon that occurs within the rubric of minjung theology. There seems, however, to be a tension within minjung theology regarding biblical authority. Taking a more cautious approach is Taesoo Yim. Commenting on the insistence of Suh Nam-Dong that minjung theologians ground their work in extrabiblical sources—namely, minjung traditions—Yim writes that “a problem lies in the fact that the contents of Minjung traditions are diverse.” Yim’s solution to this “problem” of diversity is as follows: “We must take a criterion that can measure and judge various Minjung traditions and discern between good and evil, true and false. I believe that that criterion is the Bible.” Without such reliance on the Bible as a yardstick of truth, Yim warns that theologians “will fall into a confusion of values” (145).

However, one might argue that Yim’s elevation of the Bible to the role of absolute “criterion” might similarly lead to a “confusion of values.” As noted earlier in this study, the “four Bible” model of interpretation provides a mechanism by which such phenomena as racism, sexism, socioeconomic bigotry, and other destructive ideologies become welded to biblical texts. No matter how insistent many are that they rely on the “Bible” and the Bible alone, a torrent of historic evidence demonstrates the susceptibility of Bible believers to allying themselves with the most destructive systems of marginalization and abuse. The most radical currents within



minjung theology may cause discomfort to Yim and to others who hold to more traditional views of biblical canonicity and authority; the same was true of abolitionist hermeneutics, and remains true of contemporary pro-gay hermeneutics. And yet, such radical liberationist theologies, together with their attendant praxes of biblical hermeneutics, have again and again proven irrepressible.

**“[. . .] AT HOME IN THE ANARCHY OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS”:  
GADAMER, *PHRONESIS*, AND THE ONGOING CHALLENGE OF  
HERMENEUTICS**

Up to this point in this study, each of the hermeneutical approaches I have explored—abolitionist hermeneutics, *ubuntu* hermeneutics, minjung hermeneutics, and so forth—have all fallen under the umbrella of biblical hermeneutics. “Biblical hermeneutics is simply a method of reading the Bible,” writes J. Severino Croatto (ix). However, Croatto adds, “There is no such thing as a *biblical* hermeneutics distinct from a philosophical, a sociological, a literary hermeneutics, and so on and so on. There is but one general hermeneutics, with many ‘regional expressions’” (2). One of the key figures in the evolution of this broader field of hermeneutics is the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially in his influential 1960 study *Truth and Method*. Although Gadamer explores many concepts in his larger exploration of hermeneutics, one of these subordinate concepts strikes me as particularly critical to his vision: the classical Greek notion of *phronesis*. Furthermore, I believe *phronesis* to be another potentially useful tool with which to reexamine the work of both absolutist and liberationist readers of the Bible.

In order to understand Gadamer's idea of *phronesis*, it is useful to first consider his thoughts about the role of prejudice in hermeneutics. In contemporary American society, the word *prejudice* has taken on an almost wholly negative connotation, and is often used as a synonym for bigotry. However, Gadamer uses the term in a far different manner: "Actually, 'prejudice' means a judgment that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have finally been examined" (240). Observing that "[i]n German legal terminology a 'prejudice' is a provisional legal verdict before the final verdict is reached," Gadamer concludes that "'prejudice' certainly does not mean a false judgment," but rather "can have a positive and a negative value" (240). Thus, for Gadamer, a prejudice is a provisional stance that may be adjusted or even discarded as its holder assimilates more information.

Gadamer recognizes that no human being is a *tabula rasa*; we all bring a set of prejudices to each encounter with every new text. While the "hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness," Gadamer asserts that this sensitivity "involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self." What is needed, however, is "the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's fore-meanings" (238). Gadamer's challenge that we recognize our own bias, our own "fore-meanings" represents the antithesis of the absolutist hermeneutics outlined earlier in this study. An absolutist hermeneutic is grounded in two primary types of bias. First, absolutism relies on a fetishism of authority—namely, the purported authority of the Bible, sometimes in combination with the authority of a particular sectarian hierarchy. But in absolutism, this authority fetish is never recognized as a bias; it is not seen as a provisional position that may be altered. Rather, it is valorized as an unchallengeable

foundation for knowledge. The second primary bias of an absolutist hermeneutic is its unquestioning adherence to one or more systems of marginalization and domination—racism, national chauvinism, sexism, and so forth. Unlike the authoritarian bias, which, though unchallenged, is visible, the bias towards these systems of bigotry is generally invisible; these hidden biases may be revealed if absolutist rhetoric is analyzed in light of the “four Bible” model described in Chapter One. Whether visible or invisible, however, absolutist biases close off debate and the possibility of change.

Consider the stifling biases of absolutist hermeneutics in light of Gadamer’s cautionary words:

[W]e cannot hold blindly to our own fore-meaning of the thing if we would understand the meaning of another. Of course this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content, and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or of the text. (238)

The openness which Gadamer champions helps individuals resist what Gadamer calls “the tyranny of hidden prejudices” (239). Gadamer’s hermeneutical model forces us to drag our prejudices—or, if one prefers, our provisional judgments—out from the concealing shadows; this model challenges us to reexamine these prejudices as we encounter new texts. Still, Gadamer insists upon “a rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice, and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices.” This leads him to what he calls “the central question of a truly historical hermeneutics [. . .]: where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of the critical reason to overcome?” (246).

I believe that Gadamer himself provides a potential tool by which to so evaluate prejudices, and thereby maintain a hermeneutical openness. This tool is the concept of *phronesis*. A number of scholars have commented on the significance of this concept to Gadamer's work. Fred Lawrence notes that Gadamer "makes *phronesis* the heart of his philosophical hermeneutics" (180); similarly, Jeff Malpas identifies the concept as "a central element in his thinking." An explanation of *phronesis* is a critical feature in Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, one of the seminal works of ancient Greek philosophy. Malpas cites the influence of Martin Heidegger with leading Gadamer to make *phronesis* such a core element of his work, although Lawrence credits Gadamer with "retrieving and developing Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* more adequately than Heidegger" (193). Thus, as one traces the evolution of this concept one can see the successive influence of these three intellectual giants.

*Phronesis* joins *ubuntu*, *han*, and other terms discussed previously in this chapter as one of those words whose richness defies an easy translation into a simple English equivalent. Gerald Bruns notes that "prudence, practical wisdom, reasonableness, and discernment" are the "customary alternatives" for translating *phronesis*, but cautions that "there are probably a half-dozen others" (48). Jean Grondin, for example, suggests "practical understanding" (38), whereas James Risser offers "judgment" (110). Perhaps, however, the best starting point for understanding *phronesis* may be found in *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle observes the following:

Practical wisdom [i.e. *phronesis*] [. . .] is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say this is above all the work of the man of practical wisdom, to deliberate well, but no one deliberates about things

invariable, nor about things which have not an end, and that a good that can be brought about by action.<sup>100</sup>

These words invest *phronesis* with a very practical, humanistic, and ethically-oriented quality. Gadamer takes up this line of thought when he defines *phronesis* as a “kind of knowledge” that is primarily “directed towards the concrete situation” (21). Aristotle clarifies another aspect of *phronesis* when he declares that it is not “concerned with universals only—it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars.”<sup>101</sup> Again, Gadamer echoes Aristotle when Gadamer declares that *phronesis* “must grasp ‘the circumstances’ in their infinite variety” (21). *Phronesis* is thus at ease in a world of diversity.

Just as Gadamer built upon the work of Aristotle and Heidegger in developing his concept of *phronesis*, so too has the community of Gadamer scholars continued to explore and evolve this concept. It is both this historic heritage and continuing vitality of *phronesis* as a concept which I argue to be relevant to the comparative study of liberationist and absolutist hermeneutics. Consider, for example, Gerald Bruns’ characterization of *phronesis* as “reason at home in the anarchy of complex systems—reason that shows itself in timeliness, improvisation, and a gift for nuance rather than in the rigorous duplication of results” (48). These qualities also characterize so much of the liberationist hermeneutics explored earlier in this study. In particular, there are few “complex systems” as potentially anarchic as the vast matrix that encompasses human difference, privilege, and marginalization, and the various strands of liberationist hermeneutics have provided tools by which to incorporate an awareness of this matrix into the art of biblical interpretation. In contrast with liberationist hermeneutics,

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<sup>100</sup> *E. N.* 6.7.1141b8-11. This passage appears on page 1028 of the Ross translation.

<sup>101</sup> *E. N.* 6.7.1141b14-16. This passage appears on page 1028 of the Ross translation.

absolutist hermeneutical approaches have, time and again, shown themselves to be utterly incapable of either acknowledging or navigating the complex matrix of difference. Consider once more the Reverend Mr. Pike, the white preacher whose anti-abolitionist preaching was heard and recorded by Harriet Jacobs. Mr. Pike's reading of the Bible is fixated on the idea of slave obedience. He demonstrates an utter incapability to either recognize or reflect upon the axes of difference, such as race, gender, and economic status, which play roles in the institution—namely, slavery—which he is intent on buttressing. There are no nuances to either his biblical interpretation in particular or his homiletics in general—rather, there are only harsh absolutes. Thus, I would argue that *phronesis* is completely lacking from Mr. Pike's hermeneutics, and from the hermeneutics of other individuals and institutions which carry forth the banner of biblical absolutism.

Whether practiced in support of slavery or in support of anti-gay legislation, biblical absolutism is characterized by a rigid authoritarianism that often characterizes all human activity in terms of rules. Slaves who dare to defy their masters and attempt escape are seen as violating rules; so too are same-gender couples who engage in sexual intimacy. Such a rule-obsessed worldview stands in contrast to the principles of *phronesis*. James Risser, for example, defines *phronesis* as “the determination of the good that cannot be done by rules” (110). Such a determination of what is truly “good” has motivated many generations of liberationist interpreters of the Bible. Slavery's defenders touted such biblical commands as “Servants, obey in all things *your* masters” (Colossians 3:22); abolitionists, on the other hand, asserted that a greater good—a “Higher Law,” to use a phrase of John Greenleaf Whittier's—countermanded a rigid valorization of such rules. Such an assertion represents a reasoning process that is reflective of *phronesis*.

Perhaps an understanding of *phronesis* might be enhanced by contrasting *phronesis* with *techne*, another Aristotelian concept explored by Gadamer. Martin Ostwald, one of Aristotle's many translators, defines *techne* as the "SKILL, ART, or craft and general know-how, the possession of which enables a person to produce a certain product." Ostwald notes further, "The term is used not only to describe, for example, the kind of knowledge which a shoemaker needs to produce shoes, but also to describe the art of a physician which produces health, or the skill of a harpist which produces music" (315). Gerald Bruns, discussing the work of both Aristotle and Gadamer, explains the former's distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* as follows:

[T]*echne* is understood as a species of rule-governed behavior, whereas *phronesis* is a condition of moral knowledge at the level of particular situations—call it a mode of responsiveness to what is singular and irreducible and therefore refractory to rules, categories, models, advanced pictures of the good life, and the whole idea of totality or an order of things as such. (47, 48)

*Techne* thus belongs to the world of instruction manuals, rote learning, and pedagogical authorities. As Gadamer observes, "We learn a *techne* and can also forget it" (283). One might say that a given *techne* is inherently neither helpful nor harmful, but could be employed for either helpful or harmful purposes; it is *phronesis* which allows us to discern the good towards which we may employ our *techne*.

The concepts of *techne* and *phronesis*, as well as the distinction and relationship between the two concepts, have applicability beyond the realm of hermeneutical studies. Patricia Benner, for example, applies these terms to the world of healthcare practitioners:

Medicine and nursing as healthcare practices require both *techne* and *phronesis*. *Techne*, or the activity of producing outcomes, uses a means/ends rationality

where the maker governs the thing produced by gaining mastery over the means of production, often standardizing the means in the process. In medicine, *techne*, characterized by procedural and scientific knowledge, is made formal, explicit, and certain—except for the adjustments needed for particular patients. *Phronesis*, in contrast, depends on relationship and is the kind of engaged practical reasoning that requires discerning the human concerns at stake. In medicine, *phronesis* is the practical reasoning of an excellent practitioner, who as a member of a community of practitioners, experientially develops and improves practice.

The key to Benner's elucidation of the distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* is her notion of relationship. *Techne* is a formal, procedural knowledge that may be captured in textbooks and diagrams. Despite the value of such technical information, however, it is not enough to make one a good nurse, physician, occupational therapist, or EMT. For Benner, *phronesis* takes the effective practitioner beyond mere facts and into the realm of relationships with living patients; it is the quality of *phronesis* that equips a healthcare professional to deal with the infinite variables of the human condition, and to thus serve her fellow human beings as a true healer. Benner's insights into *techne* and *phronesis* build upon the philosophical foundation of Aristotle and demonstrate the continuing vitality of the ancient sage's seminal concepts.

I have noted earlier that absolutist hermeneutics might be read as demonstrating a deficit of *phronesis*; the role of *techne* within absolutist hermeneutics may, however, be murkier. On one hand, the absolutist contention that the Bible is clear and consistent throughout may indicate that, from an absolutist perspective, *techne* is irrelevant; in other words, no special skill or training is needed in order for the true believer to understand the Bible. On the other hand, however, biblical absolutists rely on, and even valorize, such specific forms of *techne* as



linguistic translation. Furthermore, prominent absolutist preachers and scholars might be seen as having mastered *techne* in their oratorical and exegetical efforts. If the manipulation and framing of biblical passages is a *techne*, then surely the many volumes produced by both anti-abolitionist and anti-gay religious writers manifest this skill. But, to follow up on Patricia Benner's line of analysis, the skill of these absolutist writers is exercised in the absence of a meaningful relationship with individuals of the communities whom their works marginalize and even demonize. Absolutist writers fail to hear the witness of such passionate advocates as Harriet Jacobs, Gary David Comstock, Frederick Douglass and Carter Heyward. Biblical absolutists thus exercise their mastery of *techne* in absence of *phronesis*, and the results of their efforts bear witness to this intellectual and moral failure.

Exemplary of this absolutist trap of *techne* divorced from *phronesis* is William J. Webb's flawed but fascinating 2001 study *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. To his credit, Webb recognizes the limitations of a literalistic approach to the Bible, and this study represents an attempt to craft and articulate a more coherent and useful approach. Webb's interpretive method revolves around what he calls his "X→Y→Z model." In this equation, the *X* value represents the perspective of the original cultural setting in which a biblical text was written, the *Y* value represents "where the isolated words of the Bible are in their development of a subject," and the *Z* value represents an "ultimate ethic" (31). As an example of his "X→Y→Z model" in action, Webb demonstrates what he believes to be the proper approach to biblical passages about slavery. According to Webb, the original ancient Near East and Greco-Roman cultures (the *X* value) tolerated "slavery with many abuses," whereas the biblical texts (the *Y* value) demand that slavery involve "better conditions and fewer abuses." Thus, according to Webb, if one moves along the arrows from *X* to *Y* and onward, one

arrives at an ultimate ethic (the  $Z$  value) in which slavery is eliminated (37). Webb alters his equation in his assessment of biblical texts on homosexuality; “ $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ ” is expanded to “[ $W$ ]  $\rightarrow X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ .”<sup>102</sup> In this expanded equation, [ $W$ ] represents our culture’s “almost complete acceptance and no restrictions of homosexual activity”;  $X$  represents the “mixed acceptance and no restrictions of homosexual activity” of the Bible’s “original culture”; and  $Y$  represents the Bible’s “negative assessment and complete restriction of homosexual activity.” Thus, Webb concludes, his model points Christians towards an “ultimate ethic” ( $Z$ ) of a “negative assessment and complete restriction of homosexual activity” (40).

There is much that I find problematic with Webb’s “ $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ ”/“[ $W$ ]  $\rightarrow X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ ” model. The various texts that make up the Judeo-Christian Bible were written over a span of centuries, in settings that were impacted by multiple surrounding cultures. Yet Webb seems to be collapsing all of these complex, and perhaps conflicting, cultural frames into a single  $X$  value for each biblical controversy. Similarly, various biblical texts often speak in contradictory voices on certain points, but Webb seems to collapse this polyvocal biblical witness into a single  $Y$  value. Furthermore, Webb’s model remains mired in the biblical texts and in the settings from which those texts sprung; this model discounts the active post-biblical witness of, for example, contemporary gay Christians. This ignorance of such witness contrasts dramatically with the liberationist privileging of the voices of the marginalized. But perhaps the greatest problem with Webb’s “ $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ ”/“[ $W$ ]  $\rightarrow X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ ” model is that it turns biblical interpretation into something akin to a geometric problem. As I have demonstrated with my own “four Bible” model in the first chapter of this study, I am not completely averse to using pseudomathematical language as a tool with regard to biblical scholarship. But Webb’s arrows and alphabetical

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<sup>102</sup> Webb includes the brackets around the  $W$  in his equation (40).

variables threaten to strip the text of its humanity. This is particularly troubling in that Webb applies his formulas to issues that affect the lives of real people. Reflecting on Webb's arrow-and-variable *technē*—his “fierce geometry”—I am reminded of Catherine H. Zuckert's reflections on *technē*, *phronesis*, and the work of Aristotle and Gadamer. In her essay “Hermeneutics in Practice: Gadamer on Ancient Philosophy,” Zuckert writes,

Knowledge of the good is not like other forms of knowledge; it does not consist of generalizations from empirical data or experiences, nor does it constitute the application of general rules to particular situations, nor is it deductive like geometry. In sum, it is not nor can it be acquired through *technē*. As presented in the Platonic dialogues, knowledge of the good is both moral and ontological. It responds to our most urgent need and yet is somehow constitutive of the whole.

(212)

Webb's formulas, for all their cleverness, strike me as constituting exactly such a *technē* which can never lead one to a genuine “knowledge of the good”; it is a *technē* operating in the absence of *phronesis*.

### **HERMENEUTICS WITHOUT BORDERS: A REFLECTION**

In the previous chapter I cited poet Audre Lorde's admonition that “*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*” (*Sister Outsider* 112). Lorde's terminology in this statement evokes the historic legacy of American slavery, together with the horrific abuses attendant to that institution. My suggestion in invoking Lorde was that the practitioners of absolutist biblical hermeneutics use a set of interpretive “tools” akin to the intellectual and moral

infrastructure of the American slaveholding power structure—a set of tools designed to divide people, to marginalize or even demonize certain groups, and to impose oppressive conditions on an exploited class. I suggested further that the “tools” employed in liberationist biblical hermeneutics are indeed a radically different set of tools, a set of tools capable of demolishing the master’s house of injustice.

The “tools” employed by a given strand of biblical hermeneutics are merely concepts and techniques used to interpret the Bible. These concepts and techniques are not always explicitly named and categorized; they may simply arise organically out of an individual’s encounter with the biblical text. For example, the mother of a gay child might instinctively reject the anti-gay dogmas of her church and instead interpret the oft-cited strictures of Leviticus as irrelevant to her child’s life. She might never use the terminology “resistant reading”—might never learn of Judith Fetterley’s seminal book on the topic. And yet, I would suggest that this mother is using a particular “tool” even if that tool goes unnamed.

However, it seems to me that there is a special value in the naming of such a tool. Consider, for example, the adoption of Dorothee Sölle’s term *phantasie* by pro-gay theologians Robert Williams and Carter Heyward. The naming of such a tool may help to sharpen one’s focus as one approaches the text. A reading strategy made visible through naming furthermore becomes an intellectual object which may be shared with a larger community, and thereby used for more good work.

It is with a certain wariness that I have incorporated the tools of *ubuntu* and minjung theology into my analysis of hermeneutical struggles within the United States. I have no desire to play the role of the cultural imperialist who nonchalantly exploits the history and intellectual heritage of an Asian or African nation in order merely to serve a privileged American interest.

Nevertheless, I see a great value in such cross-cultural and international intellectual work. I value the hermeneutical tools of the *ubuntu* and *minjung* traditions, much as I value the ancient Greek tools sharpened by the searching mind of Gadamer. And I suspect that there are still more comparable tools, from a diversity of cultural and intellectual traditions, which I have yet to encounter, and whose use I may similarly explore. Such tools are not, I assert, museum pieces to be shielded behind protective glass; they are rather practical intellectual artifacts that might be shared and used in the continuing quest for knowledge and justice.

## 6.0 THIS FIERCE GEOMETRY: A CODA

There is, I find, a strangely menacing quality to the words in the English translation of the Borges poem which is excerpted at the start of this study. I was particularly struck by the phrase “fierce geometry”—the translators’ rendering of the Spanish *ardiente geometría*.<sup>103</sup> In the fourth chapter, I use the phrase “fierce geometry” in reference to William Webb’s letter-and-arrow technique of biblical interpretation—a technique which he uses to justify an anti-gay reading of the Bible. Borges’ phrase strikes me as relevant here because, as I note in that chapter, Webb’s notation seemingly “turns biblical interpretation into something akin to a geometric problem.”

I do not mean to cast aspersions on the field of geometry. As a high school sophomore I fell in love with the language of geometry—a language of angles and numbers, of crystalline clarity and stark beauty. A quarter century later I still have fond memories of the geometric proofs assigned to my class by our teacher. Each proof was a sort of puzzle whose solution consisted of a specific set of precise steps. Each proof solved was a happy victory—a victory laid out neatly on the page.

As lovely as the language of high school geometry may be, a language of similar form is, I assert, wholly unsuitable to the art of biblical interpretation. Moreover, William Webb is not the only anti-gay reader of the Bible to employ a jarringly “geometric” technique on the text.

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<sup>103</sup> Willis Barnstone, in an alternate translation, chose the rendering “burning geometry.”

Consider the “four Bible” model of understanding biblical absolutism which I describe in the first chapter of the study. In building their Bible<sub>T3</sub>, absolutists slice into the Bible much as I sliced into quadrilaterals and bisected angles in my high school geometry class. Absolutists treat biblical passages as something akin to geometric units which can be neatly overlaid onto the grids of their social agendas. Their attempts to justify of such phenomena as slavery and anti-gay politics often consist of strings of biblical verses laid out like geometric proofs. Liberationist writers, on the other hand, often demonstrate an ability to break out of this approach with more nuanced hermeneutical techniques, and with a perspective that breaks out of the constricting, proof-like formats favored by absolutists.

I see a common set of hermeneutical techniques—a common “fierce geometry”—used by biblical absolutists of the anti-abolitionist and anti-gay movements. Thus I was struck with an advertisement placed by the Family Research Council (FRC), an anti-gay activist group, in *The Washington Afro-American* weekly’s issue covering February 27 to March 5, 1999. The advertisement featured a portrait of abolitionist icon Frederick Douglass, accompanied by the caption “Douglass—An American Hero.” The copy reads, in part, “It was Douglass who spoke uncomfortable truth, who broke his chains and aided a whole people in breaking theirs, a man who stood for justice and human brotherhood.” There is a chilling irony to the fact that an organization which promotes absolutist biblical hermeneutics today seeks to exploit Douglass, who railed against the practitioners of absolutist biblical hermeneutics in the nineteenth century. This was not the last time Douglass’ name would be invoked on behalf of this organization; FRC president Tony Perkins wrote the following in a 2008 online editorial about the United States’ Declaration of Independence:

The great document we celebrate today inspired Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass in the fight to end slavery. It inspired Americans of the World War II generation to stand up against Nazi cruelty. It motivated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to fight against segregation. In one hand, Dr. King held the declaration. In the other, he held the Bible.

Perkins' appropriation of Douglass and King ignores the fact that each man's approach to the Bible reflects a liberationist hermeneutic that is wholly at odds with the absolutist hermeneutic adhered to by the FRC and other religiously oriented anti-gay groups.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, together with the election of significant Democrat majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives, has clearly unsettled groups like the FRC. Obama represents an anathema to the anti-gay religious right: he is a committed Christian who is comfortable discussing his faith in public, yet has also committed to a sweeping pro-gay federal agenda. The Obama administration posted a detailed outline of its pro-gay goals on the official White House website shortly after the new president took office; these goals include the expansion of workplace anti-discrimination laws to include sexual orientation and gender identity, the repeal of the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act, and the repeal of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. Unsurprisingly, the machinery of the Christian Right has roused itself to counter the new president's plans. The FRC, for example, issued an "Alert" in which the organization positioned itself as a defender of "the biblical definition of marriage" and of "Christian values" generally. Appealing to like-minded individuals for financial support, the FRC warned, "The radical homosexual activists have a champion in the White House, and they are demanding action."



Among those joining the FRC in its outraged opposition to Obama's gay rights agenda is the American Family Association (AFA). Early in 2009 the AFA released an incendiary film entitled *Speechless: Silencing the Christians*. Hosted by anti-gay radio personality Janet Parshall, *Speechless* was made available online. Featuring interviews with a host of leaders of the anti-gay movement, *Speechless* is a compendium of many familiar anti-gay stereotypes and apocalyptic pronouncements of the Christian Right; moreover, the film is thoroughly grounded in the absolutist hermeneutics of Christendom's anti-gay wing. Typical of the film's anti-gay and anti-Obama rhetoric is interviewee Jeremiah G. Dys's warning that the new president's proposed hate crime and anti-discrimination policies will create "a brigade of thought police." Parshall, referring to Obama's online gay rights agenda, claims, "Our children and our cherished freedoms of speech and religion are very much at risk. [ . . . ] And unless you and I, we, come together and speak out against their agenda, homosexual activists are going to destroy the family as we've always known it."

Nevertheless, the political and social tide may have turned against the anti-gay movement. While the American Family Association sought viewers for its anti-gay film online, an extremely large television audience saw a brief, but powerful piece of pro-gay video: screenwriter Dustin Lance Black's acceptance speech for the Best Original Screenplay award during the Academy Awards broadcast in February. Black had written the screenplay for *Milk*, a biographical drama about gay rights pioneer Harvey Milk. A San Francisco city supervisor who engaged in open political combat against the Christian Right of the 1970s, Milk lost his life to an assassin's bullet; the story of this California politician struck many as particularly relevant in light of the Proposition 8 controversy of 2008. In his remarks Black praised both the cast and his fellow filmmakers "for taking on the challenge of telling this life-saving story." He recalled his

conservative Mormon roots, and praised his mother for loving him just as he is “even when there was pressure not to.” Black concluded his speech with both an exhortation and a bold prediction:

But most of all, if Harvey had not been taken from us thirty years ago I think he’d want me to say to all of the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight who have been told that they are less than by their churches, or by the government, or by their families, that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures of value, and that, no matter what anyone tells you, God does love you, and that very soon, I promise you, you will have equal rights, federally, across this great nation of ours. Thank you—thank you, and thank you God for giving us Harvey Milk.

Speculating on the potential impact of Black’s impassioned speech, Ross von Metzke wrote that “he did more for the advancement of equal rights than the millions of dollars pumped into the No on [Proposition] 8 campaign. He reached more people than any phone bank could ever hope to.” Particularly noteworthy about Black’s speech was the Obama-like manner in which he reclaimed the language of faith in his advocacy of gay rights—“thank you God for giving us Harvey Milk.”

The Obama online agenda, Dustin Lance Black’s televised activism, and the continuing efforts of groups like the American Family Association all provide ample evidence that the culture war over gay rights rages on, much as the culture war over the abolitionist movement tore at the national fabric of the United States in the nineteenth century. And, as in that earlier conflict, the Judeo-Christian Bible will continue to play a powerful role. History will record whether or not the fierce geometries of biblical absolutism are once more rejected as a nation continues its slow march towards justice.

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